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by WILLIAM R. COX

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• **BOOTHILL OF
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by JOE AUSTELL SMALL

• **JUAN POKER—
MEDICO**

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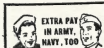


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VOLUME XXIII

MARCH, 1944

NUMBER 4

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AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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Gunsmoke and Greasepaint

CHRISTIAN DEFEVER, victor of a thousand trigger tilts, will be back next month. His ponderous deringers, his frock coat and his battered tall hat have been always a welcome sight to honest folk—and a nightmare of beckoning tombstones to the ruthless gentry of the roaring West. And many times his choice quotations of the Great Bard have blended with the death rattle in an outlaw's throat. But Christian Defever, comical scarecrow of a man, always liked to amuse his victims—he liked to give them a laugh . . . before he killed them.

Defever, though, was not in a very kindly mood when the stranger entered his hotel room unannounced. The day was hot. Defever was hot and stony broke. It had been many long days since he had eaten good food, and many longer nights since he had tasted whiskey. So this meeting with a strange man in a strange town did not sit well with Defever.

Even the stranger's offer of a stage appearance did not soothe the hungry and thirsty Defever. True, in bygone years the name of Christian Defever was a famous one in the world of footlights and greasepaint. Defever drew himself up and replied:

"A man of my professional standing plays no charity appearance except at his own choosing. I refuse you, sir. And I bid you good day!"

The stranger explained: "There was a bad accident. A lot of miners were killed. This show's a benefit all right—for them miners' widows and kids. But I'm offering you a paid job in it—not looking for a gift act."

"A job?" Defever reproved airily. But his tone was much warmed. "An actor accepts only engagements, Mr.—er—"

"Tanner is my name," said the man. "Jake Tanner. You'll learn a lot about me in this town. . . . All right, we'll call it an engagement, then. An engagement for one hundred dollars for one performance—half cash in advance!"

Defever's big, red tongue ran eagerly over his wide lips. With a stern effort of will, he restrained himself. . . .

An hour later, his hunger appeased,

Christian Defever glanced at the pretty waitress who came to clear the cloth. Years had left a certain tracery on his long and horsey face. He was not a gay blade of a youth. But neither was he an ancient. He had a taste in women—and an interest. This girl roused both.

With a genteel gesture, Defever dropped a generous tip ahead of her fingers as she reached for his crumbless pie dish. She ignored the coin. Defever's brows raised.

"A fine dinner," he suggested amiably.

This, also, was ignored. Defever's brows raised further. The devil! What if a man was grayed and his nose a trifle large? How many times did a town like this see a man of that most romantic of all professions?

The girl lifted a tray of dishes, passed into the back of the establishment, and returned for the balance of the litter on the table. Defever tried the gentle, winning smile which had turned many a pretty head in bygone days.

"A great tragedy, the death of these miners," he offered sympathetically.

For the first time the girl showed interest. It was slight, but Defever felt heartened.

"I consider it a great privilege to devote my talents to this benefit for their families tomorrow night—"

The girl eyed him curiously.

"You're the actor from the hotel?" she guessed. "Tell me something. Did you join the benefit on your own hook, or have you seen Jake Tanner?"

Defever sensed the question was important to the girl. But he misjudged the answer she expected.

"I had the honor to receive Mr. Tanner at my quarters—"

The girl cut him short.

"I hope I have the honor of being at your funeral!" she snapped. Lifting the dishes, she walked stiffly away. . . .

The vivid, dramatically different story of Christian Defever, the pretty waitress and the entombed miners will be told by Tom W. Blackburn in his powerful novelette—"Boomer King of the Footlight Trail"—along with nine other thrill-packed yarns of the Old West in the April 10 STORY WESTERN . . . published March 10th!

—THE EDITOR.

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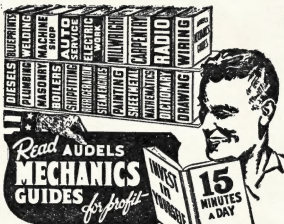
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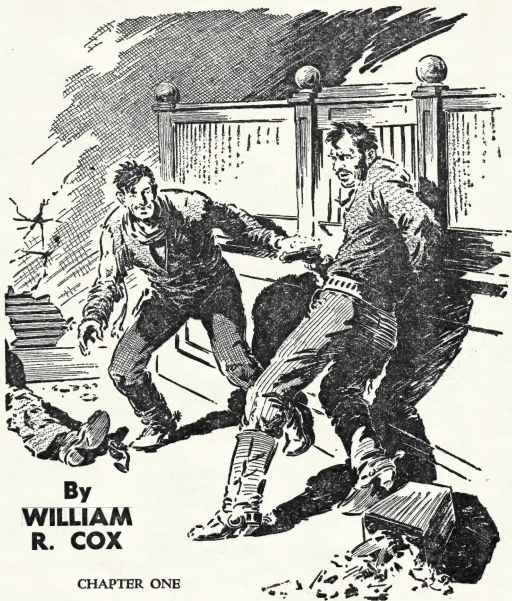
PHANTOM RANCH

Dad's Colt centered
on Sandy....



When old Dad Eldridge bought the S-Bar ranch, Mace Willard, foot-loose cavalier of the dim trails, and his owlhoot-minded pardner, the Kansas Kid, decided that Dad needed their Colt-quick protection. For the S-Bar was always bad luck to new owners, though it mysteriously flourished without shipping a single cow to market.

Thrill-Packed Novel of a Gunman's New Lease on Life



By
**WILLIAM
R. COX**

CHAPTER ONE

Bait for Cattlemen

MACE WILLARD was weary, disgusted, broke. In Montana, in Wyoming, as far south as Dodge and Abilene he was wanted. In Texas he was forever coming close to scrapes involving gunfire. He rode along this trail winding through an arid stretch of gray,

bushy desert—rode restlessly, hopelessly, fleeing his own impulses to violence.

Along this very trail came the Butterfield Coach. Passengers with fat wallets, going to Silver, to Kingston and westward rode the coaches, and sometimes the shotgun guard slept, since the Apaches were safely upon San Carlos.

There was an arroyo running across the road. Mace Willard turned in and paused. He was a gaunt man, over six feet tall, stooped of shoulder, with a blond, clipped mustache. He was over thirty, hard-muscled, uneasy as a cat in his movements, with pale blue eyes which rarely showed emotion. He fingered his rifle, thinking about the stage behind him. It would be a cinch to rob that coach.

Mace Willard had never before thought of himself in terms of gunslinging. It gave him pause now that he should consider such a job. He slumped in the saddle, eyes half-closed, reviewing the past five years. Since his encounter with Sandy Drover, five years ago, he had been in continual hot water. The handsome, grinning, evil features of his nemesis formed in the desert's heat, taunting him.

He heard the rattle of wheels. The stage had made better time than he had expected. He sat, in lethargy, unable to ride out and fulfill his scheme of banditry.

From the opposite side of the road a horseman rode. Millard came awake, his right hand sinking to his sixgun. The figure upon the dun mustang rode low. There was a bandana across the bridge of the man's nose. His rifle was in his right hand.

Mace spurred and his jaded nag went forward. The coach was rounding another bend, traveling at a smart pace. The messenger was curled up over his shotgun, oblivious to all save his dreams. With two men that coach would be a lead-pipe cinch deal. . . .

Mace said harshly, "Hold up, Bud!"

The masked man wheeled his mount. The rifle started around, then froze. Mace's Colt was steady, aiming at the belt of the ragged figure.

"Snatch that reboso loose!" ordered Mace. "Straighten up there!"

Reluctantly the left hand went up, loosened the kerchief. Mace surveyed the other's tattered jeans, broken boots and stained, ragged shirt. He lifted his eyes, squinted. "I'll be switched if you ain't just a kid!"

They pulled aside and Mace holstered his gun. The stage crept on toward them growing in size, disappearing in dust, then coming again into view. The driver waved his whip. The messenger slept. The ve-

hicle slowed down for the dip of the arroyo. A man in the coach glanced carelessly out of the side window, then looked away.

Mace sat like a stone in the saddle. His face was pale under the dirt, the lines about his mobile mouth sagged in despair. He forgot the youth beside him. He muttered, "Sandy Drover, ridin' in style. Just like always!"

"And he always will, the dirty crook!" said the young man with the rifle. "You stopped me this time, stranger. But the only way Sandy Drover can be kept honest is to get him away from Mulligan and Tucker and shoot the son in the belly!"

Mace looked at his new acquaintance. The youth's dark eyes were hot with hate, his firm chin set. He was a fine looking boy, yet there was a wildness about him.

Mace asked, "You mean Sandy's got a new gang?"

"I mean he's the toughest rustler in the Territory!" said the youth hotly. "I mean he killed my boss and tried to hang me for a hoss thief!"

"But if you murder him, you'll be hanged for that!" said Mace.

"They got to ketch me first," said the youth bluntly. "I'm ridin' south—and you needn't tag along, stranger. I'd have had him—"

Mace introduced himself: "I'm Mace Willard, from Montana way. If Sandy's your enemy, I'm your friend."

"I'm Stew Glow—but they call me Kansas Kid," said the youth, not without pride. "I'm the tophand in these parts, as everyone knows. I can ride and rope and read track—and I know when rustlin's goin' on. I been on the dodge around here, waitin' a chance at Sandy Drover. You spoiled it, Willard."

"I suppose you wasn't goin' to lift a poke or two to help you south?"

The Kansas Kid flushed. He said stoutly, "I don't care. I'm goin' over the border."

Mace was still for a moment. Then he said, "Kid, I was just about to stick up that stage my ownself. It ain't the first time I nearly robbed, neither. But we didn't do it, neither of us. And we don't have to duck over the line. . . . Tell me about Sandy Drover, Kid. Light over here and let's make a talk."

The Kansas Kid hesitated. Then he said slowly, "You look like you're broke, too.

You look—lonely—like me. Mebbe it wouldn't hurt to—make a talk."

They rode to the scant shade of the cactus and dismounted, covertly sizing each other up as they moved slowly together and hunkered down on the ground. The Kid began to talk, haltingly at first, then volubly, drawing maps in the sand, relating the history of Downwind County and the S-Bar Ranch.

♦ ♦ ♦

SANDY DROVER dropped a clinking bag of coins upon the counter and said smilingly to the dark-haired girl on the other side, "Count my money, Nancy Lou."

The dark girl said, "Another big deposit, I see."

"Sold the S-Bar again," announced the ranchman. "Excuse me, Nancy, but nobody can seem to run that ranch except me."

Nancy Lou lowered her head, counting the coins. It was a lot of money, but the S-Bar was worth more, she knew. "Moving back to the Downwind?" she asked.

"I've bought some stuff for it." Drover was fair and his regular features were attractive and open. He had a cleft in his chin and his clothing was always neatly ornate. There was a slickness and cleanliness about him which was rare to the rough and ready southwest. His voice lowered and he reached to cover one of her hands. "I'm still hopin' you'll reconsider, Nancy Lou. The Downwind is yours, any time you say the word."

She removed her hand, but smiled at him. She had a small, stubborn nose and greenish hazel eyes beneath long, brown lashes. Her skin was tanned and smooth. She said reprovingly, "Business hours, Sandy. I have plenty to do."

He watched her make out the slip and deep in his eyes was a baffled, hungry light. He was not accustomed to rebuffs. Women were easy for him. Still, he had patience. "I can wait, Nancy Lou. When you're out of mournin, perhaps . . . !"

He bowed and went into the office at the rear of the bank.

She put the money in the huge safe. Sitting upon her high stool, she stared at the ledger and saw instead the picture of her

father, Leb Holt, lying in the dust before the ranch house at S-Bar, blood in his throat, unable to tell her who had murdered him.

Yes, the S-Bar was haunted by an evil fortune. Leb Holt had bought it from Sandy Drover. There had been seven thousand cattle on the ranch and the price had been right. They had thought their money well invested.

And then the rustling had begun. It was the day of the wide loop and the race to the border. Five thousand head of S-Bar had disappeared and the riders couldn't catch the thieves. Leb Holt, rounding up his pitiful remnants of a herd, had gone doubly armed and hard-faced about his duties. His foreman Jaybird, had been of no use. The other riders seemed restless, dissatisfied.

Then the herd had stampeded—and a rifle bullet had caught Leb Holt unarmed before his house. Nancy Lou had been glad to sell back the S-Bar to Sandy Drover for range which his increasing and prosperous neighboring Downwind Ranch had needed.

Sandy had re-stocked the S-Bar. He did not need two places—and now he was making another profit. He was becoming the richest man in the County, Nancy Lou knew. She owed him a lot. He had been unceasingly kind since Leb's death, and was responsible for her getting this good job in Mr. Henry Mason's bank. . . .

Within the private office of Mr. Henry Mason, Sandy Drover bit off the end of a cigar and said, "Man by name of Eldridge bought the S-Bar. Gave him nine thousand head."

Henry Mason had a remarkable nose which began high on his narrow forehead and ran almost to his chin. He was the ugliest man in the Territory and rather glorified in his distinction. He carressed his goat beard and said, "You're a smart fellow, Sandy."

"I'm a businessman," Drover shrugged.

"The S-Bar is a good property. I'd like to have a neighbor who could handle it. Being the only rancher south of here is not profitable."

Henry Mason chuckled dryly. "Is Jaybird staying on as foreman to help this Eldridge?"

"Eldridge is a very old man," said Sandy. "He'll need help. He's retiring to the S-Bar. Was in some business or other

in El Paso. Jaybird'll stay, I reckon."

Henry Mason murmured, "I reckon he will—if you say so. Mulligan and Tucker still riding for you?"

Sandy humorously surveyed the end of his cigar. "Those boys wouldn't leave me for ranches of their own!"

Henry Mason made a steeple of long, narrow fingers and peered pixie-like through them. "You wouldn't sell me a half interest in this deal, would you, Sandy?"

"The deal's over," said Sandy, cocking one eye.

Henry Mason said, "I own the sheriff, you know."

There was a silence while Sandy drew in a lungful of the heavy smoke and discharged it straight at the steeple of Mason's hands. He arose and said coolly, "You run the town and take good care of my money. I'll run—Downwind Ranch—and mind my own business."

Mason blinked through the smoke. "Don't misunderstand me, Sandy. I'm on your side. Can't hate a man for tryin'!"

Sandy laughed. "I'll see you later. Eldridge'll be in tomorrow on the stage. You'll meet him. I specially recommended you!"

He went out and paused to caress Nancy Lou with his soft gaze. "Dinner tonight, Miss Holt?"

She shook her head. "A hen party, I'm afraid."

"Another time, dear." He smiled at her and went out. Main Street stretched north and south and was ugly. But the Three Deuces was across the way. He went over to the Three Deuces. Two men arose and joined him at the bar.

Mulligan was a giant, with hairy hands and a red, dull face and dull eyes. Tucker was short and solid and quick and his hands were as carefully kept as a gambler's.

Tucker drank sparingly as he asked, "Deal okay, Boss?"

"Fine!" said Sandy. "Mulligan can get drunk. We're moving back to Downwind tonight."

Tucker said, "Jaybird's in town."

Sandy frowned. "I told him to stay at S-Bar. That halfwit'll get us in trouble yet."

"Jaybird's not really dumb," said Tucker. "He thinks he's bein' cheated."

"I put a thousand apiece for you in the El Paso bank," snapped Sandy. "Is that enough? Come on—out with it!"

Tucker said, "It's plenty. But Jaybird's got to beef. You know him. It's his damned sense of humor!"

Sandy straightened. "I'll see him right now. You drink up and be ready to leave after dark. We'll ready up the S-Bar for its new owner."

Tucker nodded.

Sandy drained his glass and went out on Main Street in the afternoon sun and started looking for the elusive Jaybird. In a small Mexican bistro on a side alley he found his man sitting over a bottle of tequila.

Jaybird said foolishly, "Hullo, Boss."

"You drunk already?" asked Sandy.

"Uh-uh, Boss." Jaybird shook his head. "Just thinkin'."

"About what?" asked Sandy. He sat down and drank a portion of the liquor, choking as it burned its fiery way down his throat.

"About us," whispered Jaybird. He had a droop to his left eyelid and his lips curled in an eternal, meaningless grin. "We're smarter'n hell, ain't we?"

Sandy said, "We sure are. Now take one more drink and you and me are going back to S-Bar and clean-up for the new owner. We got *another* new owner, you know."

Jaybird blinked his left eye rapidly. "Ain't we the ones? Ahaw! Ahaw! How much money I got now, Boss?"

"Two thousand dollars," said Sandy impressively. "This time it'll be more."

"And I kin go to N'Yawk?" laughed Jaybird. "An' ride in a hansom cab?"

"You can buy a hansom cab, if you want." Sandy chuckled. "Come on, now. I don't want you drunk when Eldridge comes in."

He got Jaybird out and on his horse. He left instructions with Tucker and Mulligan and rode on out to the S-Bar without further ceremony. Jaybird had to be handled just right. Jaybird was fine without liquor and with his dream of New York firm in his mind. You couldn't always find a man like Jaybird in the western country. Sandy was always meticulous of the least detail in taking care of Jaybird.

That was why he did not notice the two

riders who pulled off the road in the dark to let him go by. That was why he didn't see them standing motionless with hands on guns, listening to Jaybird say:

"Eldridge, huh? Never knew a man named Eldridge. You reckon he'll like the S-Bar, Boss? Ahaw, Ahaw."

The two men at the side of the road did not move until the sound of Sandy's horses died away. Then the Kansas Kid said, "He sold it again. The S-Bar's goin' to have a new victim!"

"Eldridge?" repeated Mace Willard. There was a growing excitement in him. He reached out and gripped the Kid's arm. He said, "Can you hide us out overnight in Downwind?"

"We-ell," said the Kid. "Miss Nancy Lou never believed I stole a hoss. 'Course she caught me rustlin' some of Sandy Drover's cattle—" The Kid shrugged.

Mace said, "Ride in and see if she can stow us away. If anyone's got a finger in this pie, it's the girl. I'll wait here for you."

He waited in thoughtful silence, rubbing his hand over the butt of his Colt and biting at his lips. "Eldridge," he murmured. "I thought he was dead. He must be seven years older'n a horned toad. If it's the same Eldridge."

He tensed at the approach of a rider, but it was the Kid, who called:

"She'll put us up. It's true that Drover sold to an old man from El Paso named Eldridge."

Mace whispered to himself, "Maybe it's the change in luck. Maybe this is the break." He rode in behind the Kid, his blood tingling in his veins. They were a battered pair of vagabonds, going into the neat, square house on one of Downwind's "residential" streets.

CHAPTER TWO

Jaybirds Promise Note

MULLIGAN was roaring drunk when Tucker piloted him out of the Three Deuces. They went past the white house of Nancy Lou Holt and Mulligan said, "Boss'sh gal. Can't 'sturb Boss'sh gal."

Tucker was sober. He made a grab for Mulligan. "You're headin' the wrong way, Mulligan."

"Jush gotta say hullo to Boss'sh gal," said Mulligan perversely. "Tell her won't 'sturb her!" He swung through the gate of the picket fence.

Tucker swore. "Here! Are you crazy?"

But Mulligan was already pounding upon the door. He shouted, "Miss Nanc' Lou! It's me! Won't 'sturb you!"

There was no reply.

The houses on each side, a hundred yards away, were darkened. Tucker saw with relief. He attempted to pull Mulligan away. But the giant, enraged because there was no answer to his noise, bawled, "All right! Will 'sturb you then! 'Sturb you plenny!" He began kicking the door.

Tucker drew back, unable to budge the big man. He drew his gun regretfully. He would have to slug Mulligan.

Behind him a cold voice said, "Drop it!" Tucker dropped his gun.

A second figure went past in the dimness. This second figure was tall and thin. He went straight to Mulligan and grasped his arm. Mulligan came away from the door and hit the middle step coming down to sprawl on the ground.

The tall thin man said in a low, icy voice, "Git!"

Tucker muttered, "I'll go. Gimme my gun."

The tall figure scooped up the weapon, emptied it and stuck it in Tucker's holster.

Mulligan was coming erect, shouting, "Where is he? I'll murder him!"

The man stepped in swifter than Tucker's eye could follow in the twilight. His arms went out—one, two, three. Mulligan never saw what hit him as he pitched forward on hands and knees, shaking his head like a bull in a pasture.

Tucker grabbed the thick arm and brought Mulligan erect. Both the assailants were behind him and he did not care to turn around and look at them. He said soothingly to Mulligan, "It was a post. You keep running into it. You're drunk, Mulligan."

The giant said thickly, "Guess I yam, Tuck. Le's go home, huh? 'Fore I beat out muh brains."

Tucker walked the giant slowly down the street. He got him onto his horse and Mulligan was all right enough. He started the animals for the S-Bar without a pause

or a glance behind him. There were, he recognized, a couple of tough ones in town. Best to carry that news to Sandy Drover. A pair of bad hombres hanging around Nancy Lou's place—that would wake up the Boss!

Tucker chuckled and touched the blade in his boot. He wasn't much of a gunman, he was the first to admit. His specialty was knife play. This might be a deal for him. Tucker was well aware that Jaybird was getting more out of this business than he and Mulligan. . . .

Back at Nancy Lou's house the girl was saying, "They're Mr. Drover's men. I don't know why he keeps that drunken Mulligan. I was really alarmed, Mr. Millard. . . . But I'll have Mulligan discharged when I see Mr. Drover again."

Mace sat on a kitchen chair and gnawed at cold fried chicken. "Tell me about the S-Bar, if you don't mind, Miss Holt." Then he lied quickly, "I knew your father, away back when I was a button. In California."

She said, "You did! When he was minin' there?"

"That's right," agreed Mace. He added quickly, seeing the Kid's eyes grow round, "He was good to me and I hate to think of the way he died."

The girl's eyes clouded. "Someone shot him from a clump of cottonwoods on our land. There was no one else around and I—tried to save him. The trail got cold before Jaybird and Sheriff Pouter started on it. They lost it in the hills. We never even suspected anyone. It's a great mystery."

"Then you don't know anything about who it might have been?" asked Mace.

"I was alone," she repeated. "The riders were on the range and Jaybird was in town."

Mace said, "I'm sorry. I expect to go to work around here and get into this further. I'm not a detective, Miss Holt, but I sure aim to find out who killed Leb!"

She said warmly, "It was fine of you to ride all the way up here just for that reason."

Mace made a gesture with his nervous right hand. "Leb once did me a favor. . . . Just don't mention anything about us. We'll be out of your way tomorrow. And thanks for lettin' us use your barn."

There was no more chicken, so he led the Kid out to the hayloft. They stretched out, their heads together. They talked for an hour, rehearsing every detail of the S-Bar deals, the killing of Leb Holt.

The Kid repeated, "I was with the other riders in the hills. When I got in, it was all over. I looked at that track. It ran straight to the hills. I coulda followed it—but Sandy Drover had me helpin' to bury Leb. Sheriff Pouter couldn't track a elephant over a desert. He's Henry Mason's office boy. And between 'em, Mason an' Drover own Downwind County."

"Except the S-Bar," said Mace sleepily. "Drover owned that before and reckons to own it agin," said Kansas Kid.

"Five years ago he owned a hunk of Montana," said Mace. "He must've come down here right after I—left him there."

"Yep," said the Kid. "He come here rich—and he's stayin' rich."

Mace fell asleep at once and did not waken until the sun hit across his hatchet features and clipped mustache.

He got up and touched the sleeping boy. The Kid came up in one split instant, his gun miraculously appearing in his clutch, his eyes fierce and hunted.

Mace said softly, "I been wakin' up like that for years if someone touches me. It ain't a good thing, Kid."

The Kid shoved his gun into his belt. "No, but it's safe as hell."

Mace shook his head. "You're never safe when you got to depend on that hogleg to stay alive. . . . Let's eat."

They raided Nancy Lou's kitchen. The girl had gone to the bank and the coast seemed clear. They made the best toilets they could, but they were far from natty when they strolled down to meet the morning stage.

There was quite a crowd and they kept out of the limelight. The coach came in with a flourish and two stockmen dismounted. Then a short, frail, leathery man with snow-white hair which flowed to his coat collar crawled down and balanced himself upon a stout, oaken stick. He had the sharpest blue eyes imaginable and his glance darted birdlike among the spectators.

Across the street Henry Mason came out of the bank and started, beaming, to welcome the newcomer.

Mace moved in swiftly. The Kid ranged

on the other side of the gaffer. Mace said softly, "Want to talk to you. Dad. Got a rig over here."

They walked him along, each holding an arm. The little old man did not utter a word.

Mace said, "You can pick up your stuff later."

They got into the buckboard. Henry Mason stood and stared after them.

A fat man with a flapping vest upon which a star was pinned called, "Lose a customer, Henry?"

Henry said, "Come in, Sheriff, and have a cigar. Got an errand for you, if you don't mind."

Sheriff Pouter knew better than to mind. He went into the bank, nodded absently at Nancy Lou and joined his lord and master in the back office.



THE S-BAR was a commodious, well-furnished, modern ranch-house, with a corral of stout construction, a fine barn and a bunkhouse of ample proportions.

The three men sat in rawhide chairs upon the verandah and stretched their legs.

Dad Eldridge said suddenly, "Ran you out of Texas once, didn't I, Mace?"

"Ten years ago," Mace nodded amiably. "Little shootin' matter with Obie Goring."

"Those Germans were always slow on the draw," said Dad. "You were too quick. . . . So you think I'm in a jackpot, eh?"

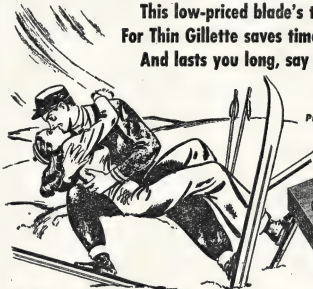
"No. But you coulda been," said Mace. "I'm here, and the Kid. We'll straighten it out."

Dad shook his white mane. "I come up here to retire. I don't want trouble. I want peaceable cowhands and nice, white-faced Herfords. I want to improve the strain of southwest cattle."

Mace said, "I want a job. I want to settle down. The Kid wants a place of his own. We all want somethin'. And there's people right here would stop us—with a bullet."

Dad Eldridge wagged his white head. "I won't have it, Mace! And I won't hire killers like you and that baby-faced rascal you tote with you! I know your kind. I'm through with that!"

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Mace pointed across the ranch yards. "You see that spot right there beyond the yucca plant? That's where they got Leb Holt. He died there. The shot came from those cottonwoods."

Dad snapped, "I'll have the trees cut down and tear out the yucca plant! I want peace!"

Mace rolled himself a cornhusk cigarette with the last vestige of his tobacco. The Kid sat forlorn, twiddling his broken-brimmed hat in his hand. Dad Eldridge got up and forgot to lean on his cane. He was, Mace knew, as tough and rugged and mean as the weathered oak of the stick he always carried.

Eldridge banged his stick on the verandah floor. "I'll have peace if I have to fight for it!"

Mace said, "You'll hire us, too. On account of here comes the hand Drover left you to run the ranch!"

Jaybird was riding in on a pretty bay mare. He wore his habitual grin and slouched in the saddle as if he owned the S-Bar. His left eyelid twitched and he said, "Ahaw! You Mister Eldridge? I'm Jaybird."

Dad Eldridge sat back in his chair, folding his hands over the knob of his stick, seemingly senile. He said in his soft Texas voice, "So you're the foreman Drover gave me?"

Jaybird said, "Ahaw! I know where your cattle are. I know your hosses and where they graze. I know all about the S-Bar—and I ain't as dumb as I look! Ahaw!"

Dad sighed feebly. "Yes, indeed, Jaybird. But I've hired a foreman. Mace Willard. Old friend of mine from Texas. If you want to stay on here as a common hand—"

Jaybird's bad eye revolved in a circle. "Don't mind helpin' awhile. C'n allus get another strawboss job. I'm a helluva cattleman." He did not seem to look at Mace or the Kid, but it was hard to tell at what Jaybird was gazing at any time. He fiddled with his reins and said, "There ain't no cook. C'n I cook awhile? I like to cook, Ahaw!"

Dad nodded. "You can cook for now. Go along, Jaybird. You and me'll get along fine, I know." He smiled weakly.

Jaybird rode the bay mare towards the corral.

Dad Eldridge turned and stared at Mace. He said sharply, "Reckon you're right, after all. I'll have to fight for my peace. And you can sure fight, you damned rascal!"

Mace said, "A hundred a month and found, Dad, for both of us. We aim to save it and buy a lil old place."

Dad roared, "No! It's too much!" He stopped, stared at them. His voice changed. "You're land hungry, eh, boys? I see it in you." He sank back and stared from one to the other of them. "I'll tell you. I'll outfit you. I'll feed you and drink you. No pay. But if we win—I'll start you on a place, stock it with Herfords and range cattle. On shares—is it a go?"

Mace and the Kid came to their feet. They each grabbed a hand and hauled the old man to his feet, shaking him like a rag doll.

Dad yelled, "Now stop, dammit! Stop, before I fall apart! I'm a poor, weak old man and don't you forget it!"

They heard Jaybird in the kitchen, moving about, whistling tonelessly. Mace said, "That Jaybird is Drover's spy, of course. We got to play a deep game, Dad, with this bunch."

"All right, we'll play it. Now, I'm supposed to have nine thousand head on this range. Suppose you go out and take a look. But first draw supplies and new outfits on me in town. And send me out three or four good young boys to look after things around here."

Mace was emphatic. "I'm sendin' the Kid back, too. And stay under cover when he ain't around, Dad."

Dad said, "Send me back a 30-30 rifle, two big boxes of shells, a sawed-off shotgun with shells and plenty ammunition for my sixguns."

"I remember those guns," winced Mace, going to the buckboard. Dad Eldridge stood, leaning on his stick, watching them. Mace thought of Jaybird, and grinned at sight of the butt of one of Dad's guns beneath his black alpaca coat. That shoulder draw which Wild Bill had introduced years ago was Dad's specialty. Mace felt almost sorry for Jaybird if anything started too soon—which Mace knew shouldn't happen. First the cattle—then the owner. That's what had happened to Leb Holt when he owned the S-Bar.

IN TOWN, while the Kid was buying supplies, Mace changed into new and clean clothing. Then he mounted the black pony he had brought along behind the buckboard. Upon impulse he went past the bank and saw Nancy Lou. He dismounted and went inside.

He smiled at Nancy Lou then looked curiously at the man with the hooked nose and narrow eyes.

Nancy Lou said, "This is Henry Mason—Mace Willard."

Mace said, "Glad to know you. I'm working for Dad Eldridge at the S-Bar."

The nose actually twitched three inches to the right. Henry Mason mumbled something and repaired hastily to his office.

Nancy Lou told Mace, "He's a strange man but very smart. He and Sandy Drover about own—"

"Everything but the S-Bar," finished Mace. "I—er—just stopped to say thanks. It worked. I'm going to look over the ground this afternoon."

"Mr. Willard, I wish you wouldn't go to great trouble. It won't bring Father back."

Mace asked curiously, "You want to see his murderer caught, don't you?"

"I'm sick of violence," she said dispiritedly. "Nothing can restore the S-Bar to me. I—I may be married soon—" She paused, amazed at the shock in this strange man's eyes. She added, "To—Mr. Drover."

Mace's face went back to its bland blankness. He said, "We-ell! I wish you luck, then, ma'am—if the happy event ever comes off." He bowed stiffly and left the bank with hasty strides. There was, she thought perplexedly, real anger in him. A man she had only seen briefly for one evening. A saddle bum who talked big about her father and his death.

She picked up her pen, but somehow the work seemed dull and tiresome. What had she read in the face of the lean man from Nowhere? It was something exciting. It was something different from what she was accustomed to from the many swains of the countryside. It was—more like the thing she saw in Sandy Drover!

It was, she thought determinedly, the very thing which had kept her from marrying Drover before now. It was a recklessness, a wild spirit which shone from the faces of certain men. When she had been very young and her father had first returned

from California, Leb Holt had that look in his eyes. After he had made his modest strike and bought the S-Bar it had disappeared—to return in the last days before he was murdered. She feared that look of far places and violent deeds. . . .

Mace Willard rode out of town with his chin set hard. He passed the turn-off for the S-Bar at noon and went south along the road to El Paso. When he had gone as far as the southern boundary of the S-Bar he sloped west, remembering Kid's map in the dust.

There was a natural boundary, a dry creek running to the hills, and he followed its course. Soon he saw small herds of S-Bar cattle. They looked fit. Mace estimated about a thousand by the time he hit the hills.

He climbed a hump of rock and paused, unlimbering the field glasses he had bought in town. He saw the main herd, stretched out northward toward the ranch-house. There were all of seven thousand, he supposed. Trust Sandy Drover to give a generous count in order to turn the deal. There would be enough in the hills to make it look good.

He shifted his gaze southward. From his high spot he could see the low, frame buildings of the Downwind, nestling snugly between a clear running stream and a grove of spreading live oaks. It was a small layout, but ideally located. It was smack up against the S-Bar boundary. There was, the Kid had said, a pass through the hills, leading to the desert and the trail to the Border. . . .

Satisfied for the present, Mace reined down the rocky hill and round the cliff at its eastern edge. He stopped short as he suddenly came upon two riders. He sat rigid, waiting.

Sandy Drover said quietly, "Hello, Mace."

The small, stocky man with the Downwind boss was Tucker, who had been so sensible last night—and who was as dangerous as a rattlesnake. Without moving his head, Mace's ranging eyes spotted the big man, Mulligan, half concealed behind a cholla. Mace said, "Howdy, Sandy?"

"I do fine," Drover grinned smugly. "You got a job, I hear."

"Things get around quick, don't they?" asked Mace genially. He was careful with

his hands, making a cigarette. He flicked the match with his thumbnail and ignited the tobacco. When he dropped the spent taper his right hand landed lightly on his belt.

Drover said, "Long time no see, Mace. Last place was Montana, wasn't it?"

"You ought to know," said Mace cheerfully. "You were in the hospital with bullet holes marring your lovely body."

"This time it'll be different, Mace."

"Sure," Mace nodded. "You'll be in a box—with the holes in your head." Mace caught Drover's signal. He clapped spurs to the black, forcing it to leap aside, forseeing Drover's signal. He flipped out his gun in the old, careless motion and sent a shot crashing sideways.

Mulligan's hoarse oath told Mace he'd made a lucky shot. Tucker was reaching for the knife about which Kid had warned him.



DROVER was cursing, trying to manage his horse, which had been frightened by the gunfire. Mace could have killed Tucker, instead he slashed with his gun-barrel and knocked the little man out of his saddle. Mace then jumped the black toward Mulligan. The big man was off his horse, holding onto his right wrist. It had been a very lucky shot, knocking Mulligan's gun away. Mace drove his Colt barrel against Mulligan's hard head—and rode around the cliff racing for the pinon grove beyond. Two shots went past his ears but he made the trees and settled to a steady gallop.

There was no pursuit. He had expected none. Sandy would do his killing in a lonely place where Mace's body could lie for days unfound—or buried where it might never be discovered. He had been fortunate indeed to escape from that trap—but he had wanted to see Tucker and Mulligan by daylight and to make sure Drover knew he was on hand. He wanted to force the action into the open immediately, hoping for errors. . . .

He rode to the ranch, satisfied. The Kid was at the bunkhouse with a couple of raffish young men whom he introduced as Shorty and Rand. There were two more out riding herd, he announced—Pete and Frank. "Got them outa jail," he added.

"They don't like Sandy Drover no how."

"That's fine," Mace said. "Have two of them always around the house. I think things'll move fast, now."

He went around front. Dad Eldridge was within doors with blankets across the windows, cleaning guns. There was a small arsenal spread about the pleasant living room. Dad was taking them apart, wiping them with oil and loading them.

Mace said, "I saw Drover. I think they'll work quick, now he knows I'm here."

Dad asked, "How many men's he got?"

Mace shrugged. "A dozen—maybe more. But only three bad ones—includin' Jaybird."

"Jaybird is cooking. He's been hovering around all day, watching me out of that one-eye. A fat man rode by—said he was the sheriff."

"Was he lookin' for anyone?"

"Just Kansas Kid," said Dad. "I paid a small fine. Seems the Kid got our men out of jail."

"I heard," said Mace. He waited.

Dad Eldridge looked up from the shotgun. "Well, I hope it's a good fight—damn it!"

Mace nodded. "I'm taking a nap. I want to be fresh tonight."

Dad did not pause in his labors. Mace went out to the bunkhouse and stretched on the cot in the foreman's quarters.

The Kid came in and said, "Henry Mason and the sheriff had a big confab. They sent telegrams north. You wanted for any little old thing, Mace?"

"Only shooting Drover," said Mace grimly. "That's five years old, though."

"They might try to arrest you," said the Kid. "It's wonderful how fast they work. You know what I think? I think Henry Mason is tied in with Drover."

"Money always associates with money," said Mace sententiously. "You better ride out and watch that main herd. Warn your men to have rifles ready." He rolled over, and the Kid went out.

Mace saw Jaybird through the window next to his cot, peering from the kitchen door. Jaybird must be puzzled at the warlike appearance of the new S-Bar men, Mace thought. The left eyelid of the vacant-faced man twitched nervously. He was wearing a .45 beneath his dirty apron.

It was going to be a matter of timing, he thought. He closed his eyes resolutely and sought sleep. His mind reverted to the dark girl whose father had been killed out front of the house. So she was going to marry Sandy Drover!

It wasn't the first girl who had been attracted by Sandy—to her sorrow. The blonde in Montana had wanted to kill Mace after the fracas—but Sandy had deserted her.

He growled, knowing now that sleep would not come. He got up and sat at the foreman's desk, idly opening the drawers.

He opened a soiled and tattered account book with Jaybird's name scrawled in the front. Mace's eyes ran down columns of totaled figures. Leb Holt had bought a good ranch, well-stocked, all right. Then the totals lessened and the story was plain enough. Rustlers had taken their toll.

Mace was about to put the book aside when a piece of paper fell to the floor. He picked it up and scanned the scrawled words upon it.

You can have your New York trip if you pull it off. Use a rifle and cut for the hills. We'll cover your tracks. Be very careful.

The note was unsigned, but Mace recognized Drover's handwriting. He carefully refolded the note and took out his wallet to place it therein. The blow which descended from behind caught him absorbed and entirely unsuspecting. It crashed behind his ear and he fell across the desk. The note fluttered from his hand to the bunkhouse floor.

Jaybird knelt and gathered it lovingly to him. He was quite pleased with himself. He muttered, "Think I'm dumb, do they? 'At's my promise note. I gotta have that. Sandy promised me New Yawk and a hansom cab."

He paused and stared down at Mace. "Sandy didn't say kill *this* one. I better tie him up, though. I better see Sandy. I better hurry!"

CHAPTER THREE

Drover's Double-Cross

KANSAS KID was strutting a little, "Shorty, you mosey up there an' watch if anyone comes. . . . Rand, you stick around in front. This is a fast deal we're pullin' off here, y' know."

Shorty made a face. "If Sandy Drover finds you around these parts you'll swing fast enough!"

"Git movin'!" said the Kid. "I got important duties."

He went inside the house and said, "Mr. Eldridge, I bet Mace was a tough one when he was young."

Dad kinked his blue eyes and said slowly, "No. I wouldn't say that. Mace was just quicker'n most."

The Kid observed, "You sure got guns. . . . What did you say was your business back in Texas?"

"I didn't say."

"Oh!" The Kid turned very red. "Scuse me. I know better'n to ask questions. But things is happenin' so fast—"

Dad said, "It's all right, son. Where is Mace?"

"Sleepin'. He figgers on ridin' a heap tonight, I reckon. Drover won't waste time now he knows we're on the job."

Dad clicked the last cartridge into place and shoved his six-shooter under his arm. "Reckon I ought to rest myself. The stage trip wasn't easy on an old man."

The Kid said, "You ain't exactly decrepit!"

"I'm eighty years old," said Dad, showing a full set of perfect teeth. "And I don't

Coming up in the next issue is a bang-up novelette of your favorite Western character, Christian Defever, by the well-known Tom W. Blackburn. He calls it "Boomer King of the Footlight Trail." You can enjoy it March 10th!

reckon you'll live that long, young 'un. You ain't the type."

Kid grinned youthfully, "Mebbe not. But I'm quick, too, like Mace."

He went outdoors and stretched himself. He thought of Pete and Frank out on the range without supper. It was growing late in the afternoon and he decided to take them something cold from the kitchen. He strolled down to the corral with his package of food and noted that Jaybird's horse was gone. "The rascal done sloped," he said to himself. "Mebbe I better track him. I can take the food out and sorta check on him, too."

He forked a bay broncho that struck his fancy and checked Jaybird's plain trail. It led south, towards the Downwind ranch. The Kid was not surprised. He followed the tracks out toward the hills, where they made a loop and doubled back.

The Kid deserted the trail, making a mental note of a clump of extra-crooked mesquite where he could pick it up again. He rode down on the plain, searching for his men. He located the large, grazing herd and rode around its edges, hallooing.

There was no sign of Pete or Frank. He circled the entire body of cattle, found plenty of sign which showed that the boys had been riding that afternoon. It was growing dusk when he picked up the tracks of several horses coming in from the hills.

He got down and read the sign closely. He saw that six riders had piled out of the covert, then found where either Pete or Frank had met them. He picked up a discharged forty-five shell. There was a damp spot nearby.

The Kid straightened. He could read the story plainly, now. A half dozen riders from Downwind had come in and eliminated his two young riders. At least one of them was wounded. They had been captured and eight horses had gone back to Downwind—or at least into the hills where so much could be hidden.

He squatted on the ground, debating. He heard the whine of the bullet even before it struck. He felt the impact as he was moving, springing upward. It hit him in the right shoulder, knocking him sprawling.

But he had a hand on the reins and the bay was steady. Another shot whistled by as he dragged along, seeking the stirrup

with his toe. He clutched at mane with his left hand and dragged himself into the saddle. Obediently, the bay started for home.

The shock was bad and he crouched over the pommel, his arm dangling, blood running down his fingers and dripping to the ground. But he kicked the bay with his spurs and his round face set into hard lines. He had to hang on. He had to get back to Mace. . . .

In the town of Downwind, Henry Mason was saying to Sandy Drover, "I wired Montana when you told me about this fella, Mace Willard."

Drover's face was stony. "Who said anything about Montana, Henry?"

There was silence in the little office in the rear of the bank. Nancy Lou was closing her books outside. The front door was locked.

Henry Mason looked like a parrot in a black coat. He said, "I've got a sawed-off shotgun in my lap, Sandy."

Sandy leaned back across the desk from the banker and blew smoke at the ceiling, careful this time not to let any of it get into Mason's eyes. He said, "What do you want, Henry?"

"I knew you came from Montana," said Mason. His narrow eyes seemed amused. "Never cared about it before. Things were going all right. You brought me money—a little. It's different, now."

Sandy repeated, "What do you want?"

"Fifty-fifty," said Mason. "I'll take half of any risk."

Sandy held the cigar in his fingers and surveyed the end. It was late in the afternoon, almost supertime. He had hoped to take Nancy Lou to supper. He said regretfully, "I'm afraid you're a damned fool, Henry. I'm taking risks that you can't handle. You're not that tough."

The banker said, "I'm tough enough to hold a gun on you, Sandy. You played me for a small-town banker. You made a mistake. I loaned you money to start. I watched you. Now I want my share."

"Or else?" demanded Sandy, leaning forward, his eyes steady upon the banker.

"I know who killed—Leb Holt," said Mason slowly. "And who rustled his cattle."

Sandy said:

"Ah! That's it."

MASON nodded, silent, waiting. It was, Sandy Drover knew, the turning point. If he gave in, took Mason as a partner, he would never again be safe. If he admitted that he had trapped Leb Holt into a bad deal and then had him killed because he was tougher than Sandy had expected, he would be marked for doom.

"Well, Henry—" said Sandy Drover—"It's like this. Maybe you can help, at that. If you hold the sheriff long enough, for instance—after Eldridge's S-Bar cattle disappear. And if he don't look into the fact that a couple of his jailbird boys are missing—"

"Killin'!" said Mason. "I thought so!" He did not look dismayed, to Drover's surprise. The predatory light in his eyes increased to a bright flame. "I'll handle this end. Pouter was getting suspicious, I don't mind telling you!"

Sandy said quietly, "Pouter is a jack-ass and could be eliminated as easily as Pete or Frank!"

Mason said, "You're a hard one, all right. And so am I! I'll keep Pouter busy. You go ahead with your plans. Just so's I get my half, Sandy. It'll be worth your while."

Sandy said, "Okay. That's that, then, Henry."

He got up and walked out. He looked hungrily at Nancy Lou, waiting for him at the door. Sandy had dreamed of settling down, marrying the girl and becoming an important citizen. Henry Mason may have ended all that. For it was not safe to stay in a town where it was known that he had committed a crime. It might now be time to move on. Sandy said:

"I was going to ask you to eat with me, but I'll have to go back. Something has come up."

"I'm sorry, Sandy. . . . I want to tell you, thought, that Mulligan annoyed me last night. I wish you'd fire him, Sandy."

He said instantly, "Of course I will. Consider it done. Will I see you tomorrow?"

"If you like. Will you ride in?"

"Probably," he said, smiling at her. "I'll see you home now."

On Main Street they met Mulligan and Tucker.

Mulligan, his arm bandaged, called loud-

ly, "It's okay, Boss, see?" He waved the arm. "That dude can't hurt me none! He was lucky to get me a-tall!"

Sandy scowled, stopping, Nancy Lou on his arm. He said, "Mulligan, you're fired!"

The big man's mouth dropped open. "Are you gone crazy, Boss? With that Willard around—"

"Shut up!" snapped Drover. "Tucker will give you your time! You're through. And if you ever bother Miss Holt again, I'll kill you!"

Mulligan's mouth shut. Tucker, close beside him, was elbowing him away.

Nancy Lou heard the big man say as he went, "Aw, don't kick me—"

She walked home with the rancher.

Sandy said, "Nancy, I love you. But you know that, don't you?"

She said irrelevantly, "What was Mulligan saying about Mr. Willard?"

He controlled himself with effort. "I might ask what Mr. Willard was doing at your house last night—?" Then he bit at his tongue, realizing he had given himself away.

She cried, "You knew about Mulligan! Tucker reported it, and that Mr. Willard beat your man!"

"Now, wait, Nancy Lou. This is all a misunderstanding—"

"You had better go away and straighten out your story, then, Sandy."

She was as rigid as iron, standing there, staring at him. He waited a moment, but she did not relax. He said with dignity, "You will have a chance to choose between Willard's words and mine." Which was beside the point, he knew, but gave him an exit. He stalked away, furious with himself.

She watched him, then upon impulse cut across the street and between two buildings to watch the length of Main Street. She saw Mulligan and Tucker join him, saw them mount and ride away in perfect amity. She had been right then—Mulligan was *not* fired.

She thought of Mace Willard and it occurred to her that Mace was in danger from Mulligan, now that Mulligan knew Mace had beaten him. She went thoughtfully back to the house and sat for a moment in her parlor.

Then she changed to overalls and a dark

shirt and went to the stable. Her pony was fat, and needed exercise. She had not seen the house at S-Bar for many weeks—and the new tenant was an old man who would welcome suggestions, she told herself. While out there she could tell Mace Willard of her suspicions and warn him that Mulligan would be looking for revenge.

CHAPTER FOUR

Killers Corral

THE BAY pony trotted in, throwing its head, neighing in a soft treble. The boy on its back slumped off onto the dirt. Randy stared, then let out a bellow and ran to the Kansas Kid, lifting his head.

Dad Eldridge stood in the door and said, "What is it? Can he talk?"

The Kid opened his eyes. He mumbled, "Tough, Boss. . . . Plenty tough. . . . They got Pete and Frank. . . . Must be—gonna—run them cattle—tonight . . . Get Mace! Wake him up!"

There was the sound of a rider in front and Dad Eldridge whirled, reaching under his coat.

Nancy Lou rode in, smiling. She caught sight of the boy on the ground and her expression froze. She stared uncertainly from one to the other. Dad said, "You'd better go into the house, Miss. Can you nurse this lad?"

She said, "Is it—is it Mr. Willard?"

Dad said, "Nope. Not yet!"

She dismounted and said, "Oh! It's Stew Glow! The Kid!"

Dad Eldridge said slowly, "What did you say was his right monicker, Miss?"

"Stewart Glow," she said, kneeling beside the boy. "The Kansas Kid. The poor lad—"

They got him indoors and Dad went to the bunkhouse, his blue eyes thoughtful. He paused at sight of the empty bunks and called, "Willard! Mace! Are you drunk? Wake up!"

He went in through the gathering darkness, groping and muttering, "Never knew that lad to sleep like this!"

Outside a horse galloped and Shorty's voice called, "Mace! I think they're out! Mace! They're hittin' the main herd."

There was a scratching sound in the

little office. Dad struck a light and a lamp glowed. Shorty framed in the door, his breath coming fast. "Just before the sun went down I seen a dozen of 'em through the glasses. . . . Look!"

Dad was looking and then he was acting, slashing the rawhide which held Mace's hands and feet.

Mace stood and stared at them. His arms and legs tingled with pain as the blood again ran through them. He mumbled, "Jaybird ties tight. . . . What's happened?"

They told him. He wobbled over to the wall and took down his belt from a peg, making sure Jaybird had not emptied his Colt's. He found a short gun and thrust it into his waistband. He picked up the rifle in the corner and said,

"Well, we'll have to go out. They're moving fast, like I wanted. But I counted on Pete and Frank—"

He stared at Dad. He was still a bit dazed from lying in that cramped position for hours, but he knew what was to be done all right. He said thickly, "Saddle me a bronch, Shorty."

Dad said, "You don't have to do this, you know. I can send for the sheriff. . . ."

"No good," said Mace. "Drover's man—through Mason."

"There's a dozen of them out there," said Dad.

Mace nodded. "Got it all figured. We ride for the hills. There's a pass below the Downwind."

Dad said, "I can't ride that far, Mace."

"I'll take the two kids," said Mace wearily. "It's an Injun trick—if I pull it."

He walked outside and moved around. There were clouds over a three quarter moon, which was the first good thing in a bad day. The blood ran freely again and his head cleared. He said, "Got to see the Kid."

He went into the house. He stopped at the door of the bedroom, staring. The girl turned and faced him, her face still pale. She said, "Drover's men did it! They're running off the cattle!"

Mace nodded. "Same pattern."

"Like they did ours," she whispered. "And they killed Father because he suspected. It was Sandy all the time!"

Mace said, "You were going to marry him."

"Not really," she said. "I said so—but it was an impulse. Because you—looked at me—in a certain way. . . ."

The Kid stirred. He said in a strong voice, "Saddle me a hoss, Mace. I'm goin' with you."

"No," said Mace. "I've got it figured. The kids will be all right. I'll bushwhack 'em Apache style."

The Kid said, "I'm goin'! They can't stop me with a bullet in the damn shoulder—Scuse me, Nancy Lou, but I gotta go!"

Mace said, "Keep him here. I'll be back—"

He stared at her and she did not turn away. Then he wheeled and went out. He hadn't much chance, he knew, against a dozen of them. He saw Dad handing rifles to the lads. Shorty and Rand were just youths from around the countryside, without distinction save that they hated Drover and his trio of hellions, Mulligan, Tucker and Jaybird. The Kid had plucked them from the hoosegow, where Mason and Drover had cast them for brawling.

Shorty said quietly, "Don't worry, Mace. Pete and Frank were our pardners. We'll be in there with you."

That was one thing about the western land, of course. Mace could depend on them to stick. Wherever there was oppression they would bob up, these ragamuffin youths with nothing at stake but their wages and their skins—ready to toss lead for their leader. He said, "Let's ride then."

He saw Dad standing in the reflected light from the house, staring from under white brows, watching them go. The Kid could give the old man the lay of the land and he would know what Mace intended. Dad was solid, all the way through. And he would be looking out for Jaybird or anyone else who prowled to threaten the S-Bar.

Mace rode the black and led the way westward. The two youths, armed to the eyelashes, followed silently. They hit the hills, but there were arroyos and level places where the horses could get their wind. They rode on at a headlong, furious pace.

It was necessary and possible to get ahead of the herd. Drover had thought everyone connected with the S-Bar had been rendered impotent. He knew the forces were scanty to begin with and he

had taken shrewd steps. Jaybird had unwittingly played the game and Sandy was now aware of that and was moving accordingly. Mace spurred the gallant black and rode west of Downwind Ranch and through a dry gulch which led to the last hill.

He topped it and the moon peeked out. Below they heard the cries of the herders. Mace could make out the mass of moving animals—S-Bar cattle headed for the Pass.

He said, "Here we go! Last lap!"



THEY flew down the hillside and into a gorge of pines. The air was redolent with the balmy odor and there was a trace wide enough for thirty or forty steers abreast, leading straight to water, then to the desert trek. In the morning the herd would be well on its way to the Border—and Sheriff Pouter nor any other man would dare to follow Drover's crew of cut-throats, Mace well knew.

He drove the black along the trail, and the voices of the Downwind men were so close that they could distinguish the bellowing accents of Mulligan above the others. Mace said, "You two go up there. See the rock? The Kid told me it was perfect for us."

There was a shelf of stone, masked by boulders which had rolled down to rest there years before. On the other side of the trail was a cave, thirty feet above ground. Mace tied his horse in the pines, well out of sight and started climbing. The two cowboys disappeared with a last backward wave of understanding of their task.

Mace threw his rifle ahead, then scrambled to the mouth of the cave. It was no place for a sustained siege, but it would do for quick attack, he thought. He squatted and loaded his rifle. His face was grim. He did not like this Indian business, but it was three men against twelve outlaws and their three leaders. He waited for the first of the cattle to come through.

It was not long. They had been just in time. The horns clanked together as the herd narrowed down and lumbered into the Pass. A rider, ghostlike, appeared on the point.

Mace threw up his rifle. At the last

moment he could not fire in cold blood. He called, "Turn 'em back! You're covered, all the way! Turn that cattle back!"

The man ducked his head and shouted, trying to ride out of danger. From across the road a gun crackled. The cowboy went off his horse and lay still. Shorty and Rand were thinking of Pete and Frank and had no scruples.

Dots of flame came from the dimness. The Downwind man were well into the Pass. Mace chose a target and fired. A steer went down on its knees at the narrowest spot and the advance faltered momentarily. There would be a stampede, of course, onto the desert beyond.

Mulligan was shouting, "Up on the rocks!" and guns began to crackle. Mace settled down and fired at Mulligan's voice, but heard no yell. Three riders in a knot charged the hill and Drover's voice urged them on. Mace drilled through one. The boys took care of the others.

Drover yelled, "Get the cows through! We can handle them later!"

Mace emptied his gun. He reloaded, squinting at the moon, wishing now that it would show itself. Another rider went down under the fire of Shorty and Rand. Tucker shrilled a warning. Then there was silence, as the cattle milled, piled up, a vast herd spread for a mile from the entrance of the Pass.

There was a single shot, and the rocks splintered around Mace, uncomfortably close. He knew at once that someone had climbed higher than he, that he was in acute danger.

He slipped from the opening of the cave and started up the sheer edge of the cliff. It was dark enough for him to climb unobserved. He clutched at bushes, at a young tree growing precariously from rock.

He came to a ledge and looked about. There was a flash of fire from above Shorty and Rand's position, and in another moment they would be under direct fire, he saw.

He gritted his teeth and went on upward. He clung to a mesquite, drew up his legs and hit the top of the divide. He stood there, collecting himself, and the moon came out another foot and shapes appeared in the night.

He saw the figure moving. He rested the gun on the branch of a sturdy little oak

and waited. Again the man moved, crawling ever closer to a spot above the boys on the ledge. The light increased and the man stood up cautiously, aiming his rifle.

It was Jaybird. Mace would know the lanky figure of that murderer anywhere. He poised, taking good aim.

Mace called, "Jaybird! Try me, this time!"



HE SAW the lean man turn, starting with surprise. He fired. Jaybird threw his gun down into the gorge, screamed in pain and waved his arms wildly. Then he tumbled forward, straight down onto the heads of Shorty and Rand.

From below pandemonium broke loose. Mace could see the riders now. Mercilessly, remembering Leb Holt and Pete and Frank, and the wounded Kid, he poured in the lead.

He heard Drover curse soundly. He heard Mulligan roar as men dropped from their saddles. He heard Tucker say, "No use! There's a posse or somethin' up there!"

Then the cattle were stampeding for fair, headed through the pass, milling about in the Downwind pasture to the north. Some of them got through. Others turned and ran in a circle, never getting to the gorge. There was time enough for the herd later, Mace thought.

He came down the hill, trying to find his horse. He was uneasy afoot, conducting this Apache warfare. He wanted the animal under him, wanted to meet Drover face to face.

He found the black and heard Shorty call, "They dusted, Mace! They went back Downwind way!"

"Mount and ride!" said Mace. "After them!"

It was tremendously dangerous to work their way among the milling cattle. They fired six-shooters in the faces of the panicked steers. Rand almost got caught in a pocket of them, but Shorty waved his slicker and rode them off. They broke through in a body, the three of them, and the Downwind Ranch lay four miles on a line to the north. Shorty panted, "If they hole up we'll have hell's own time cleanin' 'em out!"

Rand called, "I counted nine we dropped! It don't seem possible. Jaybird's layin' on that cliff with his ugly brains blowed out, Mace! That was a shot!"

"Too high," grunted Mace. "Ride!"

He wanted to catch them before they were prepared. If they barricaded the ranch, there was little chance. He rode with everything he had, driving the little black to its limit.

They sighted the ranch and there was a fence which ran along its rear. There were no lights and Mace said, "Careful!"

He had no intention of running into an ambush in his own turn. He rode cautiously forward. No shots greeted him.

In a second it struck him. He sat in the soundless night, listening. He said, "They never stopped here! They're hitting the S-Bar!"

"Migawsh!" said Shorty. "Wimmen and cripples and old men!"

Their steeds were spent, but they shortened the reins and whipped them. They rode like the wind along the flat, ignoring danger of a rear guard now, seeking only to win the battle against time. Mace thought of the girl and of old Dad and his guns. They would have to kill Dad Eldridge first—and they were equal to it, the gang of them, despite the valor of the old fighter.

There were shots ahead and Mace yelled with relief. He saw fire against the night

sky and kicked the black to its last vestige of strength. He heard a shotgun boom and knew Dad was still alive.

Shorty and Rand lagged on their spent horses. Mace blessed the black pony and went on. He saw riders milling about the S-Bar, saw that the barn was afire. He cut down from long range. One of the marauders pitched to earth.

He circled to make a more difficult target. He saw three men only and was puzzled. He cut across and fired at another. He came up close and saw that the man on the ground was not one of the leaders.

Shorty and Rand were whooping in. The other man fled. Mace, completely mystified now, rode for the house while the boys began beating out the fire in the barn.

Dad was in the doorway with a hot rifle in his hand. He said flatly, "Only three of 'em hit us. The rest went towards town."

Mace said, "That's it! Are you all unhurt?"

Dad said, "Reckon so. How about the herd?"

"We'll round 'em up tomorrow," grinned Mace. "I got to get another hoss, now. Drover's still ahead of me."

"You can let him go now," said Dad. "He won't bother us any more."

Mace said slowly, "This is personal, Dad. While he's alive he bothers me just by living." He saw the girl in the doorway of

ROUGHNECK!

**NOT SINCE
I USE
STAR BLADES!**



Kid's room and went on, "It was Jaybird killed your Father. There'll likely be a note on him, from Sandy Drover, ordering the job done. Jaybird kept the note instead of burnin' it—he was a queer one."

"Was?" she asked. "You—he's gone?"

"Deader'n a mackerel," said Mace grimly. "And others with him. It wasn't a nice job." He nodded to them and went outside. The barn was burning briskly, but the boys were doing a good job. The bunkhouse and ranch building were safe so long as they worked.

He went to the corral and saddled a fresh horse. He saw to his revolvers and thrust the rifle into a scabbard. He mounted and rode swiftly away—alone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Hot Lead Freeze-Out

IN THE Downwind Bank Henry Mason stood against the wall, his hands at his sides, empty. Mulligan and Tucker were cleaning out the yawning safe. Henry Mason's nose twitched, his narrow-set eyes wandered from the littered floor to the lounging, graceful figure of Sandy Drover. He said, "So this is the way you do your partners!"

Sandy said, "That was your idea—not mine!"

"You'll swing for this," said Mason.

"If I do," said Sandy pleasantly, "you'll never know it."

Mason's mouth worked. "I know too much," he said dully. "I suppose you'll have to kill me."

"Yes," said Sandy. "I won't mind doing it, either. I never liked you, Henry. And when you moved in on me—it turned my luck."

Mason said, "That new fella turned your luck! That Willard! You're runnin' out of town. You're scared of him!"

Sandy sobered, standing away from the counter where Nancy Lou worked day-times. His smile vanished, his eyes grew hard as agates. He said, "For that you get one in the belly."

Mason said, "Because it's true, eh, Sandy? Because you know you're runnin' from him?"

Mulligan straightened up, bearing a canvas sack. His reddened eyes gleamed with

avarice. He said, "It's a nice chunk of dough, Boss."

"Take it outside," said Sandy. "You and Tucker stand guard."

Tucker said, "You won't turn chicken, Boss? You want me to do it for you? This feller's got to go."

At the door, Mulligan turned, his ears cocked. He said suddenly, "It's a rider, comin' fast from the south, Boss!"

"Willard!" said Tucker. He exhaled a long, hissing breath. "You'll get your chance, Mulligan!"

Henry Mason said, "No, you won't! Look at Sandy! He's scared, I tell you!"

Sandy Drover's face was putty-colored. He said, "Put out that light!" He caught himself, staring at Mason. He drew his revolver, cocked it. He said slowly, "Wait! Leave it on. He'll suspect we're here if he sees it. . . . Scared, am I, Henry? I'll show you!"

"You'll bushwhack him," said Mason. The tip of his big beaked nose was red, now, but he looked death in the face without flinching. "You'll never meet him fairly. I know you, Sandy. You are flashy—but you're frightened of this Willard!"

Mulligan put down the bag of money and stepped behind the door. Tucker, moving lightly, grinning with glee, opened the portal on a crack, then scuttled to a position where the counter concealed him. Sandy Drover said, "Damn you, Henry! Remember this when you're lying! The shot that downs you will bring him in here! I'll show you who's scared!" He raised the gun, aiming at Henry Mason's middle.

The banker said flatly, "Against three of you! That's your bravery! I'll see you in hell, Sandy!"

Drover said again, "Damn you!" He fired.

The sound was very loud. Henry Mason, moving at the last moment, gauging his timing with the tensed nerves of despair, threw himself sideways. The bullet bit deep into him, knocking him against the wall, cutting off his shout of warning to the man who clattered down the street without. He slid along, slipping, going down, black hatred in him, his life's blood oozing, reaching with clawing hands for support. He saw Sandy Drover turn to the half-open door. He saw Mulligan, leering, his cuffs rolled back, ready to get in his handiwork.

He saw Tucker nursing the long-bladed knife.

His hand encountered the large inkwell made of stone from the mountains. He braced himself, feeling that he was dying, imbued only with the idea of Sandy Drover's duplicity.

There were cautious, light footsteps, then a strong voice calling, "Come out, Sandy! I'll give you an even break."

Flat against the wall, his knees bending, Henry Mason gasped once, seeking breath. Sandy said, "Come in and get me, you dumb saddle-bum!"

Mace said, "I'm coming, Sandy!"

Henry pulled himself away from the wall. His mouth opened, the shock left his body and the pain set in. He gritted his teeth to refrain from crying out. All three of them were straining at the doorway. He lifted the inkwell, made two attempts to draw back his arm. A fleeting instant memory of afternoons in Kansas, throwing stones at squirrels, flashed across his feverish brain.

Mace said, "You asked for it, Sandy."

The door moved, swung wide open. Sandy fired. There was only emptiness and the street without.

Henry threw the inkwell in a sweeping overhand toss. It sailed through the air and he thought it would never reach its destination. He held his precious breath, waiting. The heavy object slammed past the wide brim of the hat, caught Sandy behind the ear, driving him forward, to his knees.

Henry screamed, "No, Willard! There's three of them!"

Then there was blood in his mouth and he fell upon the floor just in time to evade the furious shot which Mulligan threw at him from the front of the room. He lay there, thinking, "I'm dying, but I gave Willard a chance. . . . It's the end—but Drover'll go with me!"

The voice of Henry Mason carried out-doors. But Mace was not coming through the inviting doorway. . . . He was at the side window, hammering with the barrel of his gun. The glass crashed and Mulligan's gun beat a hole through the shade.

Mace laughed and ran back to the front. It was a game, now, and he was thoroughly involved, his life was nothing. He placed a shot through the door and heard Tucker call,

"Douse that light, Mulligan!"

Like a flash, Mace started forward. He wanted the light for accurate shooting. He leaped over the sill, crouching, landing six feet within the bank.



HE SAW Tucker's amazed expression, heard him yell in alarm. He saw the stocky man's knife go back. With incredible speed, Tucker released it in an underhand throw, straight at Mace's middle.

It must have been the Kid's earlier warning which made him sidestep. The blade whistled past. Mace threw down the .45, felt it buck in his hand. Tucker threw up his hands, tottered, fell sideways, clutching at the counter.

Mulligan, wheeling, ran smack into the falling body. Mace was going forward when Mulligan fired. The shot missed Mace's head but threw a shower of splinters from the wooden counter which blinded him momentarily.

He kicked out and the gun flew from Mulligan's hand as the toe of the boot caught his injured wrist. Bellowing with rage, pain and the lust to battle, the big man came bare-handed to the attack. Before Mace could move the hairy hands had closed upon him, and his gun was gone, sliding along the floor.

He fought silently, knowing the danger. Mulligan was a great animal when the close work was on. They scraped up and down the narrow space panting, locked in tight embrace. Slowly, surely, Mulligan was perfecting his bear hug which could have but one ending. Mace's feet spread as he fought for control, for a breath of air.

On the floor, Sandy Drover stirred, turned over on his back. He sighed deeply, rubbed his eyes, sat up. His blurred gaze went about without actually seeing anything, his numbed mind refused to work.

He put out his hands and touched the solid floor. He saw the struggling men, shook his head. Slowly he came to full consciousness. With great care he felt of his head, ascertained that his skull was not broken open. Lights whirled, the room tilted, he retched.

He got to his knees. He saw Mulligan's straining back, saw the boots of the other

man slipping from their purchase. He mumbled, "Good ole Mulligan. . . . Break the damn fool's back—"

His eyes fell upon Tucker. He frowned. This was no time for Tuck to be sleeping on the job. . . . Something ought to be done.

He distinguished the pool of blood, widening, seeping out from beneath the stocky rider. More than anything this visible sign of violence and sudden death rang a bell within him, brought him to life. He sought to overcome the numbness of his limbs, to reach for a weapon.

He saw the right leg of Mulligan's opponent slide back. He scowled at this, recognizing an old trick. He saw Mulligan swell to exert his last surge of power.

Mace let the big man come on over. He curled his left leg about the thick calf of the giant and rolled on the floor. He twisted, so that Mulligan received the full impact of the fall. He managed to get an elbow in the midriff of his opponent. His fingers spread, he jabbed with them at the eyes of his biting, kicking enemy.

He broke loose, scrambling to his feet. Mulligan leaped to face him hammering with iron fists. A glancing blow knocked Mace almost through the door into the street. He heard a wagon rattling, heard a woman call something, knew the town was waking to the violence within its borders. He lowered his head and came back.

Mulligan was swinging and each blow would have killed an ordinary man. Mace took two of them to get inside, at the bigger man's body. He felt the blood run down his face. But he got two fists to working and his lean shoulders swayed rhythmically as he punched with all the skill of experience, worked on the solar plexus beneath the layers of hard flesh.

He felt Mulligan give way, heard him gasp. He stepped back and levelled off at the broad, vindictive face, the fish mouth which gasped for air. He punched deliberately, choosing his spots, moving inside the clumsy if murderous arms. He got away, absorbed in his job, watching Mulligan.

The big man gulped and came back. He was a hog for punishment. He seemed to love it, grimacing, asking for more. Mace dealt it out, his knuckles bleeding, his heart pounding from the mauling he had

received. His fists whished through the air and thucked into Mulligan, again and again and again.

The wagon stopped rattling, there were voices. Sandy Drover got to his feet, shaking. He could have drawn his left-hand gun and taken a shot then, but he wanted to be very sure. He saw Mace clearly now, saw that Mulligan was about beaten. He steadied himself against the counter, got out his weapon and waited, stony-faced, for his chance.

As his vision cleared and he became himself again he saw that Mace's holster was empty. He smiled a little at that. He cocked the revolver, holding it steady. Mulligan got one on the point of his chin and, at long last, gave ground. Staggering, weak-kneed, the giant went to the wall. There was nothing but thin air between Sandy Drover and Mace Willard—thin air and the gun Sandy thrust forward.

In the doorway a sharp voice called, "Here, Drover!"

Mace flung himself sideways, reaching for the short gun in his waistband. It was gone. He ducked and grabbed and picked one from the floor.



SANDY was sideways to the door. He had to turn and make his shot. Framed against the babble and scramble of Main Street's excitement, Dad Eldridge stood, crouching a little. In the buckboard Nancy Lou sat, white-faced as the Kid tried to climb down and join the fray. As Sandy turned, the old man's hand dipped within the black coat. It came out unbelievably swift.

The two shots were almost as one—but not quite. The white hair of Dad Eldridge stirred as the bullet went through the heavy mane above his ear. Sandy Drover dropped his weapon. He clutched at his middle and walked forward, as though to attack Dad. He hesitated, his hands holding his middle. He looked dully at Mace and said, "He—got me. What do you know—about that? . . . The old man—"

Mace carefully replaced his own gun in its worn holster. He said, "The old man was a ranger in Texas for twenty years, Sandy."

Drover grinned weakly. He tried, in

the end, to die on his feet, to straighten himself. He said, "I missed that one. Thought he was a grocer—or somethin' . . . But I nearly had you, Mace!"

"Yeah," said Mace. "You got any relatives? Any message, Sandy?"

The wounded man hooked himself on the counter, his head sinking a bit. Nancy Lou came inside the door and stared at him with round eyes. Sandy said, "Nobody to give a damn. I was always a bad one. . . . You're lucky, Nancy. Mace is tough—a very—tough man. . . ." He writhed with a last spasm of pain and fell away from the counter, flat upon his handsome face. He did not move again.

Dad Eldridge said in a harsh, flat voice, "I hope he is the last. I hope I never have to draw on a man again!"

Mace stepped between Nancy Lou and the corpse. He said gently, "He died game. He had stuff in him."

They went out together to force the bandaged Kid back into the buckboard which had brought them so swiftly to town. Dad Eldridge stood and stared at the carnage within the bank. Sheriff Pouter, perspiring and important, came through and went directly to Henry Mason. The fat man looked up from the bleeding body and said with something akin to disappointment.

"He's alive. I believe the critter'll git well!"

Dad said, "Yeah. And you'll still be a poodle dog—unless we decide to change things around here!"

The sheriff looked into the deep blue eyes of the old man for a moment. Then he said submissively, "Yessir. Guess we could stand it. Yessir."

* * *

The Kid said, "I got folks! That I'll never get over. Me! With folks!"

Nancy Lou said, "They'll be proud of you—part owner of a ranch."

Dad Eldridge stood up. They were all upon the porch of Nancy Lou's white house.

It had been a strange wedding, in a way, just the four of them with no fanfare. But there had been too much behind it all. Dad said:

"Knew your people years ago, on the Brazos. They moved from Kansas. Mebbe you oughta call yourself the Texas Kid, now!"

The boy said, "It'll be swell to see them. I shouldn't of run away. If it wasn't for Mace—"

Dad said gently, "Come along. We got to get Downwind ready for these honeymooners."

The old man and the youth walked towards Henry Mason's house. Nancy Lou said, "Henry Mason is helping to finance us—that's the hardest thing to believe. I know now that he was Sandy Drover's partner."

Mace shook his head. "He almost was. But Sandy wouldn't have it, and in the end Henry saved me. He and Dad. I should be dead, right now."

She said, "No. You acted, you made them see we were on the right side. That is what saved you. The risks you took, alone. . . ."

Mace said uncomfortably, "We've got to take care of Shorty and Rand. Jobs for life. Some calves of their own. These kids—like Stew Glow—they're all right."

The sun had set behind the mountains to the west, where the last rays of light threw a pink glow upon the humped heights, but in the east was the afterglow, all purple and gold and glorious. It was a blending of the old and the new, a forecast of things to come, Mace thought. He reached for Nancy Lou's hand and said, "The bloodshed is ended. Dad is right. Everything now has got to come right. Hard work, hard play—fine. But no more violence for Downwind!"

He smiled at her. The sunset was reflected in her gentle, delicate features. An era had ended; an era had begun. The tired rider had come home.

THE END



Showdown At Pestilence Flats

By
**JOSEPH
CHADWICK**



Johnny fired back at the riders...

Johnny Chance, destined to die because of a lethal bullet lodged near his spine, taunted death when he volunteered to drive a cargo of food to a smallpox-ridden village—and there he found that a man can die more than once!

ALL his life, which was some twenty hard and lean years, Johnny Chance had been pushed about one way or another. So, riding into Sabin City that wintry afternoon, he was surprised by the way folks treated him. "Why," Johnny muttered, "they're plumb friendly!"

Men nodded and said, "Howdy, pilgrim." A woman or two, their arms full of store bundles, smiled at him. Then, in the Silver Lode Saloon, when Johnny took the last silver dollar from his jeans, the

bartender said, "This drink is on the house, friend."

This unaccountable show of friendliness mystified the kid, but it also thawed to a small degree the frigidity that dwelt in his heart. It even eased somewhat that deep-rooted bitterness which showed in his dark, sullen eyes.

He guessed that maybe Nevada was like that. This was his first *pasear* north, and what he had seen so far he liked. The town had a prosperous look. The street's hitch-racks were lined with saddled horses and wagon teams. The bank was a brick building, and there were a dozen stores. The Silver Lode was a gaudily painted saloon.

Liquor fumes and a pot-bellied stove made a warmth that felt good on Johnny's face. He downed his free drink, and if the whiskey did not make him forget certain things, it did mellow him. He rolled a smoke and hooked his elbows on the bar. The rest of the saloon's patrons were gathered over by the roaring stove, and a tall handsome man in fine store clothes was doing the talking.

"Like I say, gents," the man was saying, "Marro Flats must be starving. A wagon-load of food would be a god-send to those folks. All we've got to do is to get the grub to them." He struck a pose, chest out and thumbs hooked in the armholes of his vest. There was a diamond in his necktie. "Now, I'll pay for the food out of my own pocket. Who'll volunteer to drive up to the Flats?"

A sudden silence closed down, and the dozen or so men in the audience squirmed in embarrassment. Johnny Chance noticed that even the bartender busied himself, mopping up the bar. Johnny leaned over the bar, made his voice a whisper.

"Who's the speechmaker?"

"John Garrison, the banker."

"Never knew a banker to be so generous. What's his game?"

"No game, stranger," the bartender whispered. "Garrison was once a tight-fisted skinflint. There was a girl he wanted to marry. She wouldn't marry a mortgage-closin' sharp, she told him. She hitched up with a no-good with a rundown cow spread up in the hills. It was a shock to Garrison, and for the past year he's been a changed hombre."

Johnny turned and looked at the banker with a new interest. Garrison looked disappointed. He was buttoning up his overcoat to leave. "No hard feelings, boys," he said. "But spread word around that I'll pay a driver fifty dollars for the trip."

"It's too big a risk, Mr. Garrison," a lanky rancher muttered. "You won't find a man to drive to the Flats for any price."

Johnny Chance dropped his quirky, ground it under his boot-heel. He stepped forward with reckless grin twisting his lips.

"Sure, you'll find a man," he said. "Me, I'll make that trip!"

Garrison swung about. The crowd turned and gaped.

"You mean it?" the banker asked.

"Do I look like I'd josh you, mister?"

Garrison looked at him hard. He saw a lean youngster with a bitter smile and a pair of don't-give-a-damn eyes.

"I reckon you don't," he said. "It will be a fine thing you're doing, friend—a fine thing."

"You said somethin' about fifty dollars," Johnny reminded him.

It was then that the commotion rose in the street. Men shouted wildly. Gunshots blasted in the cold still air. A boisterous voice yelled, "Hiya—hiyah!" And the guns crashed again.

Garrison shouted, "It's the bank—a hold-up!" And he leapt toward the door. The crowd rushed after him, and Johnny Chance trailed along. Johnny reached the street in time to see three masked men mounting horses in front of the brick-faced bank. The trio kept shooting wildly and the crowds pouring into the street scattered back out of sight.

Johnny saw that only John Garrison faced the outlaws. As they came racing down the street, he fired a pocket deringer at them. Johnny lifted his own gun, thinking there might be a reward if he knocked down one of the hard-cases. He fired once and saw one of the masked men jerk in the saddle. The outlaw did not drop, but his horse side-swiped a buggy standing in the street. The man recovered and raced on, and the three were then out of sixgun range. They rode on out of town, one of them still shouting that unholy, "Hiya—Hiyah!"

Johnny crossed the street and looked

about in the dust. He had seen something shiny drop when the outlaw bumped the buggy. He saw the object now, lying close to the buggy's rear wheel, and he stooped and picked it up. It was a silver conch torn from the outlaw's chaps. Johnny thought a minute, then pocketed the conch. He looked around. The crowd was gathering again, all along the street. John Garrison was running into the bank.

"Reckon he'll forget about that trip, now," Johnny muttered, half aloud. He needed that fifty dollars. He hated to lose it.

He went back to the Silver Lode and ordered another drink. This time the bartender let him pay for it. . . .



FOR most of an hour, excitement rippled up and down Sabin City's main street. People congregated and talked about the bank robbery, and the town marshal appeared and took authoritative charge. There was talk of raising a posse. Somebody telegraphed to the county seat for the sheriff. There was a lot of wasted motion. Johnny Chance sat by the stove in the saloon, and marveled at the way people squandered time. He, himself, hadn't any to waste. Time was precious to Johnny Chance.

Finally a buckboard loaded with cases and cans pulled up in front of the Silver Lode. The driver climbed down and went over the team's harness. A crowd gathered asking questions, and then John Garrison came striding from the bank. Johnny got up and pulled on his shabby sheep-lined coat. This was the wagon of supplies for Marro Flats. Despite the robbery, Garrison hadn't forgotten.

Johnny stepped out and pulled his flat-crowned black sombrero down tight against the whipping wind. Garrison was talking to some men in the crowd, saying, "Yes; those unhung sons got five thousand dollars!"

He saw Johnny then, and he shook the kid's hand. He said, "It's a cold night, my friend, but I think you're the man to see this chore done." He reached into his pocket and brought out five ten-dollar bills. The wind snatched at the yellow-backs, but Garrison quickly tore them

squarely in two. He placed one part of the bills in his pocket, handed the other part to Johnny. "I don't distrust you," he said with a smile. "It's just my banker's caution. You'll get the other half of the bills when you get back from Marro Flats."

"Fair enough," Johnny said.

He pushed through the crowd and brought his roan horse to the buckboard and tied it to the tail-gate. He went forward and climbed up onto the driver's seat and took up the reins.

Garrison said, "This wagon belongs to a man named Luke Hand up at the Flats. You don't need to bring it back."

He stood there and seemed to want to say something more. Johnny thought that the crowd seemed expectant, too. There were women in the gathering, and children, and the cold was making everybody stamp their feet and hit their gloved hands together. Johnny's breath steamed. He looked at the sky. It was clear.

"Somethin' else?" Johnny finally asked.

"Well, maybe I ought to tell you," Garrison said. "There's smallpox up at Marro Flats. It's an epidemic. A lot of people dying."

Johnny's nerves jumped. He felt that he had been tricked, and he had one of his wild impulses to leap down and smash his fist into John Garrison's handsome face. But for once he controlled his fiery temper. He sat there and thought it out while the crowd waited, and he knew that it did not matter.

Smallpox, hell!

He was already doomed. Doc Marvin, back in Arizona Territory, had warned him that he, Johnny Chance, had but six months to live—and that was two months ago. There was a bushwhacker's bullet, a 44 slug, lodged in his back close to the spine, and neither old Doc Marvin or young Doc Mission, the medico at Signal City, had dared operate. Both doctors had believed, after careful examinations, that surgery would be fatal. They had wanted Johnny to have his six months.

But Johnny no longer cared. He was just a saddle bum now, broke and down on his luck, and he knew he would face smallpox or even bullets to earn fifty dollars. Besides, he thought looking around at these people of Sabin City, he wanted to do the chore for them and for the folks

at Marro Flats. They had treated him decent, here in Nevada.

Johnny lifted the reins and kicked off the brake. "Shucks, I'm goin'," he muttered. "A hombre can't expect to live forever."

It was then that a gray little man wrapped in an old Army overcoat pushed through the crowd and pointed his finger at Johnny.

"I'm Doc Anders," he said testily. "Don't you come back here, younker. You'll bring the pestilence with you."

Johnny frowned at the banker. "What about my money?"

"You'll get it," Garrison said. "I'll meet you outside of town in the morning. S'long, my friend."

Johnny grunted. He snapped the ribbons and called "Giddap!" to the team. The heavily loaded buckboard moved slowly out Sabin City's main street, and the crowd stared silently after it. Johnny hunched himself up in his coat against the cold. The road twisted and climbed through bleak country. Marro Flats was a long way. . . .

Night closed down, the wind rose, and the cold crept in to the marrow of the kid's bones. Clouds piled up against the starry sky, and the snow came in windswept flurries. Johnny began to curse himself for a fool. He began to think he would freeze to death. And if not that, he thought bitterly, he'd catch the pestilence. He sure didn't have much in life to look forward to. Fifty dollars wouldn't last long or buy him much fun. He began to envy those three masked men who had held up Mr. Garrison's bank. They could ride high, wide and handsome on five thousand dollars.

He was nagged by his bitter thoughts as the horses plodded slowly on. The snow swirled about him and the wind cut right through his threadbare clothes. He envied those folks back in Sabin City, snug in their warm houses. He pushed the team on, and finally he topped a hill and saw a cluster of shacks below.

◆ ◆ ◆

THERE were a few lighted windows, and smoke puffed from several chimneys. Johnny snapped the reins and shouted, and the wagon rumbled down the slope. A door to one of the shacks opened as he pulled the team to a stop. A gaunt, hollow-cheeked man with despairing eyes stepped out into the gale.

"Pilgrim, don't tarry here," he said flatly. "We have the pestilence. Half our number has already died. I am the only one not on a sickbed. Me, I had the pox before."

"Ain't figurin' on stoppin' here," Johnny said. "I brought you a load of grub. Mr. Garrison in at the bank sent it."

He saw the gaunt man's stunned, disbelieving look. He got down from the wagon, and almost collapsed. He was numb from the cold. He staggered back to his roan horse and untied its bridle reins. He lifted himself into the saddle. His teeth chattered. He knew he couldn't ride far in this cold. He had to put up somewhere.

"Where can I find shelter for the night?" he asked.

"Nearest place is the Harmon ranch, five miles north," the gaunt man said. "Ain't no road. Just keep ridin' over the hills."

WHAT DO YOU SEE?

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

All the same except one... which is the odd picture?



ANSWER:
Number Five. He is only "two-haired".



"Thanks," Johnny muttered.

"May the Lord watch over you, friend," the man intoned. "Your comin' here to-night has made me really believe there is 'peace on earth and good-will toward men'."

Johnny said, "Adios," and rode north.

The cold grew worse by the minute, and after a mile Johnny didn't think he could make it. His face felt frozen, his hands and feet ached, and, smallpox or not, he knew he would be better off back in one of those warm shacks at Marro Flats. He swung his roan horse about, and then saw the yellow-red glow of a campfire off to his right. He gave a joyous yell and headed toward the fire.

Three men were about the campfire. Two sat huddled close to the flames, and the third lay wrapped in a blanket. Three horses stood nearby. Johnny sang out, "Hello, camp!" but got no answer. The three seemed too cold to show interest. Johnny dismounted and hunkered down at the fire. He pulled off his gloves and held out his hands. His body seemed to absorb the warmth.

"Cold night," Johnny muttered.

"Cold," said the man across the fire.

His voice was deep and booming, like, Johnny thought, that of a parson or a lawyer. His face was lean and dark with a wide mouth, a high-bridged nose and a pair of coldly glinting gray eyes. He was holding a long-bladed knife over the fire, just above the flames.

"What's that for?" Johnny asked.

"That, traveler, is to cleanse this scalp. The heat will sterilize the steel." He stared at Johnny with his cold eyes. "You have arrived just in time to see a surgical operation performed." He nodded to the other man sitting by the fire. "Shanghai, administer some more of the anesthetic to the patient."

Johnny Chance stared, puzzled by the dark man's big words. He saw Shanghai, a wizened little man with a broken nose, take out a bottle of whiskey and pour a stiff drink down the throat of the man in the blanket. The dark man grinned at Johnny.

"You are, I take it, Johnny Chance from Signal City," he said. "I was there when you killed that tinhorn saloon-owner, Jacquard, in a gunfight. A job well done, sir. I admired your handiwork." He

bowed very stiffly. "My name is Morrel."

"You are a medico?"

"Men call me 'Doc', and I have been many things at many times." Morrel stood up. "Is Duane properly anesthetized, Shanghai?"

"Reckon so, Doc."

Marvelling, Johnny watched what followed. There in the flickering firelight, with the wind howling about them, Doc Morrel used his hunting knife as a surgical instrument and removed a bullet from the thigh of the man Duane. It was expertly done. The incision was washed with whiskey, then bandaged with strips torn from the wounded man's shirt. But one thing jolted Johnny. The bullet had come from his, Johnny Chance's gun!



DUANE wore chaps, and the chaps were decorated with silver conchos. One conch was missing. It was in Johnny's pocket. He had picked it up on the street at Sabin City, just after the bank hold-up. These three men were the bank robbers!

Johnny unbuttoned his coat, so that his gun was handy. But it did not seem that any of the three hard-cases remembered seeing him in town. Johnny watched Doc Morrel rise and take a drink.

"I fear some complication like pneumonia may set in," Morrel muttered. "We've got to get the patient to shelter. We could ride back to the Flats, but it is foolish to risk the pestilence. And—" He coughed embarrassingly. "And I don't think we'd be welcome in Sabin City." He turned to Johnny Chance. "Friend, do you know where we can find shelter?"

"There's a ranch four or five miles north of here."

"Ah, but which way is north?" Morrel said, looking about into the swirling snow. "I've lost my bearings."

Johnny stood up and looked about. All at once, he wasn't sure of his directions. The storm and the darkness threw him off. He remembered that he had twisted about while riding through the hills. He wasn't sure where Marro Flats lay.

Doc Morrel said, "Shanghai, you were once a sailor. Get our bearings, and we'll head north to this ranch."

"Got to see the sky," Shanghai growled. "And it's clouded over."

But he squinted upward, and the clouds were in patches. Finally he got a glimpse of the sky and of the stars, and he said at once, pointing, "North is this way, Doc. You sure Duane can fork a cayuse?"

"We'll see," Morrel said.

They got the wounded man on his horse. He groaned loudly, but it was a drunken man's protest rather than that of a suffering man. Duane had been completely anesthetized. The other two bank robbers mounted, and Johnny swung up onto his roan. He needed shelter too, but now he was thinking of the stolen money. Five thousand dollars was a small fortune. A man with but a few months to live could live good on that much money.

They rode through the cold. Shanghai led Duane's horse and also kept an eye on the stars when they showed through the clouds. Johnny rode along beside Doc Morrel.

Johnny said, "Doc, you and that Shanghai hombre are plumb smart. You fixed Duane up like a medico would, and Shanghai can read the stars."

"Ah, but Duane is expert too, in his own way," Morrel said. "He is efficient with lethal weapons. I would call him a gunmaster."

"Three smart hombres, eh?"

"Indeed!" Morrel exclaimed. "And why not? It has happened before. Three smart hombres following a star on a night such as this!"

That did not make sense to Johnny. He wondered if Doc Morrel wasn't a bit loco. But he did not think about that long. He tried to think of some way to get his hands on that five thousand dollars. He believed that Morrel had the money in his saddle bag.

Duane called back, "Doc, maybe these ranch folks won't put us up."

"Ridiculous thought!" Morrel retorted. "Don't we come bearing gifts?" He reached back and patted his saddle bag. "We'll be welcome. Do not fear."

Numb and aching with cold, they finally found the Harmon ranch. But disappointment hit them like a physical blow. The ranchhouse was a heap of charred ruins. It had been burned out. A vast shiver shook Johnny Chance. He began to think he

wouldn't live out the six months old Doc Marvin had given him. But then he saw the barn. It was a ramshackle building, but it had been untouched by the fire.

"The barn, gents!" he said. "There's a light in it. The Harmons must be livin' there. Come on—before we freeze to death!"

They rode over with a clatter. Johnny jumped down and pulled open the big door. The others rode in, then he led his roan inside and pulled the door shut. It seemed warm in the barn. Morrel crossed to the far corner of the building and lifted a curtain that seemed to be made of flour sacks sewn together. There was an oil lamp burning behind the curtain, and Johnny glimpsed a cook stove as Morrel went into the corner. It appeared that the Harmons had saved their household things when their house burned.

Shanghai and the drunken Duane were already stretched out on a pile of straw. Johnny, his eye on Doc Morrel's saddle bag, busied himself with unsaddling his roan horse. He saw an old canvas-topped wagon and, in stalls, two crowbait horses, then he found some oats for his horse. He was rolling a smoke when Doc Morrel came rushing from behind the curtains. He had thrown off his several coats and his hat, and now was rolling up his shirt sleeves.

"This is a chore for a real medico," Morrel said excitedly. "But there's no time to fetch one. There's a woman here, Johnny, and she's alone. Her husband pulled out after the house burned—the mangy coyote!" The man had forgotten his fancy words in his excitement. "He went to a woman over at the Flats, Mrs. Harmon says, and she got word just yesterday that he'd died of smallpox. Ah, she's a brave woman—this Mary!"

Johnny stared. "You know her, Doc?"

"Sure not. But her name would be Mary, wouldn't it?"

"Me, I don't know. You want I should help?"

"Get some firewood for the stove, and some water I can heat." Morrel's words cracked like gunshots. "There ain't much time!"

There wasn't much time. Johnny rushed about getting wood and starting a fire, then he ran to the well and found a bucket

filled with ice. He put the bucket right on the stove, so the ice would melt. He had a vague impression of a pale faced young woman with a wealth of golden hair. Then Doc Morrel told him to clear out, and he left the curtained-off corner. He walked back and forth, smoking quirky cigarettes, and he could hear the woman softly moaning. Morrel's two partners slept through it all. Johnny took time out from his anxiety only to transfer the stolen money from Morrel's saddle-bag to his own.

It was along after midnight when Johnny heard the lusty, hiccougging bawling of the baby. He breathed more freely then, vastly relieved.

Doc Morrel finally came from behind the curtain. He had turned the lamp down low. His lean face was haggard and he looked as though he had come through an ordeal. But he grinned.

"A boy," he said. "And the mother is doing nicely, thank you!"



WITH the stolen money stowed away in his saddle-bag, Johnny Chance had meant to wake and ride out before the outlaw trio woke. But when he roused himself at dawn, Doc Morrel was already looking after the mother and her child. The baby was crying in the lusty way of healthy babies. The mother lay still, smiling, in her bed.

Morrel came out as Johnny was saddling up. He said, "Johnny, those two can't stay here alone. They've got to have care. Now, I think Mrs. Harmon is quite strong enough to be moved. She's an amazing woman! There's a wagon here, with a top to protect them from the weather, and we can wrap them in blankets. It's up to you to drive them into Sabin City."

Johnny tied his latigo. "Not me," he muttered. "I'm travelin' fast and light."

Morrel's hand flashed down and up. "You'll travel right to hell, friend, if you don't do as I say!" The hard-case had his gun out.

Johnny saw the chill look in Morrel's eyes and he knew that the man meant what he said. Johnny shrugged. "All right," he muttered. "But maybe the folks in town won't want this widow and her baby."

"They'll want them, all right," Morrel growled, "or Shanghai and Duane and I will come in and shoot up that town!"

So he had his way. They harnessed up the Harmon crowbait horses, then very carefully they placed the woman and her baby in the wagon, wrapped in blankets and on a bed of straw. Johnny Chance tied his horse to the tail-gate, climbed onto the seat, and took up the ribbons. There was a road from the Harmon place into town. He started along it. He looked back once, and the three outlaws were dusting out in the opposite direction.

Johnny chuckled to himself. Doc Morrel hadn't missed his loot.

The morning was cold but there was no wind or snow, and Johnny knew that his passengers would be all right. He drove slowly over the rough spots, but where the road was smooth he used a whip to move the crowbait horses at a trot.

By midday, he had traveled most of the distance and was within sight of town. He was looking for the banker, Mr. Garrison, who had promised to meet him, when he heard the drumming of hoofs behind him. He stopped the team, whirled about and drew his gun. Doc Morrel had discovered that his money was gone. He and his two partners were coming to overtake Johnny. They had their guns out.

Johnny fired a shot to warn them off, but the trio came on at a wild run with their sixguns blasting. Johnny fired again, at Morrel this time, but he missed. Bullets were drilling through the wagon's top. Johnny thought of the woman and the baby inside, and he knew that they would be in danger if this shooting continued. He quickly holstered his gun and flung up his arms.

"Hold it, Doc!" he shouted. "The money's in my saddle-bag!"

The trio jerked their horses to a halt, and Morrel got the stolen money from Johnny's horse. He returned it to his own saddle-bag, then he levelled his gun on Johnny.

"Kid, I ought to gun you down for trickin' us like that," he growled. "I'd do it, if you didn't have to get those folks to town!"

Duane yelled, "Hiya-hiyah! Rider comin', Doc!"

Doc Morrel gave Johnny one last black

look that told the kid the next time they met it would be with flaming guns. Then the three outlaws swung their horses about and rode back along the north road. The rider from town came up at a lope. It was the banker, Mr. Garrison.

"What was all that shooting, Johnny?" Garrison asked. "Who were those men?"

"The bank robbers," Johnny told him. "I got the stolen money from them, but they trailed me and took it back. I met up with them last night. We stayed at the Harmon place. You see, the widow—"

"The widow!" Garrison almost shouted. "You mean that no-good Jeb Harmon is dead?" There was a queer hopeful look in his eyes. "You sure, kid?"

Johnny had no chance to answer that. From within the wagon came the not unpleasant sound of an infant crying. The mother's soft voice tried to quiet the child. Garrison stood looking at Johnny as though stunned. Johnny quickly told him about what had happened during the night. He told everything.

"Mary a widow!" Garrison murmured. "And there's a baby!"

He rode to the rear of the wagon and Johnny could hear him say, "Mary, you've come back. Why, you've come back to me!"

Johnny went back and untied his roan horse. He remembered that the Silver Lode bartender had told him about Mr. Garrison having lost the girl he wanted to marry to a no-good up in the hills. He could understand why the banker was so excited and happy.

Garrison turned to him and gave him the other halves of the five torn ten-dollar bills. Johnny told him he was sorry that the bank robbers had gotten away with the five thousand dollars. He did not say that he had meant to keep the money for himself.

"It's all right," Garrison said generously. "I'll stand the loss. That Doc Morrel took care of Mary, so I owe him something. They can have that money."

He shook Johnny's hand and said he would drive the wagon into town, in to his house. Johnny mounted and rode on. He rode down Sabin's City's main street, meaning to ride straight through town, but he paused as he came opposite the church. There were services being held, though it wasn't Sunday, and Johnny sat his horse and listened to the homely voices raised in song.

Then suddenly he understood many things. He knew why these folks had been so friendly to him yesterday, and why Mr. Garrison had been so kindly toward those sick people at the Flats. There were other things that seemed to be explained, but Johnny Chance wasn't sure of that.

He lifted his reins and rode slowly on, still hearing those singing voices. He did not feel bitter now, nor at war with the world. Nor did he notice the little quiver of pain along his spine, which was the warning signal that he was doomed. Not on this day.

Those voices were singing carols.

This was, Johnny Chance now realized, Christmas Day.



BOOTHILL OF LIVING

Buck pulled himself close to the thundering bull to escape the jagged rocks. . . .

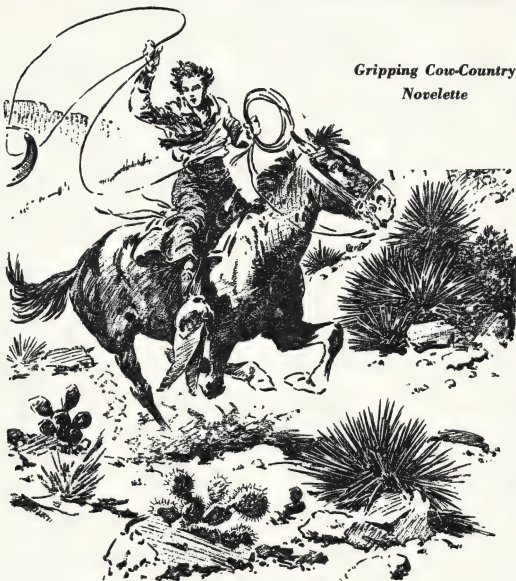


Like his murdered father before him, Buck Wheaton tried to fight Lard Mason, killer boss of the Big Thicket Country. And like his father, Buck fell into Mason's hands—to play out his string lashed to the belly of a fear-crazed longhorn. . . . A dramatically different story of the hell-roaring Old West.

GUNMEN

By
JOE AUSTELL SMALL

*Gripping Cow-Country
Novelette*



CHAPTER ONE

Don't Cross a Fat Man!

BUCK WATSON looked at the blare-eyed longhorn bull and thought: *I've dust-busted them mean-eyed old bulls from the Staked Plain to the Brazos River for goin' on ten years, and now*

it 'pears like one's gonna bust me right through the gates o' hell! Damn. . . .

"Yuh got 'im tied up, boys?" the fat man asked.

"He's tied!" "Hook" Glover said. The slim, owl-beaked man stood back surveying his handiwork. He smiled grimly.

"Lard" Mason walked around in front of Buck Watson. He looked at the waddie

with beady little black eyes that flashed with anticipated excitement and grim intent. They were close together, those orbs. They shined with kill greed like the burning eyes of a serpent.

"You ought to a'known better than that, Buck!" The fat man's voice was pseudo-benignant. "It ain't been a year since you locked horns with old Lard Mason and come out floatin' head down in the river with a bullet in your hide—"

"Back!" Buck Watson corrected. "A lowdown bushwhacker's bullet in—"

"Don't bother me with details!" the fat man said. "We were surprised to see you ride into the Big Thicket today. But you didn't get very far inside the great tangle, did yuh now? You are hard to kill, young fellow." Lard Mason's voice suddenly ground hard. His fat lips tightened. "But our little hi-life cure always works! It gives our subjects time to repent for snoopin' into old Mason's business. And it gives the boys a little relaxin' fun. We keep it back for our special friends!" The man laughed then. It was more of a cackle than a laugh. It shook the rounded curtain of fat hanging down from his chin in the vague form of a neck, and trembled Lard Mason's huge belly. The fat man was silent then.

"Strip him under!" Lard Mason said and the excitement came back to his eyes. "Let's get on with our little joke, boys!"

Hervy Williams grabbed the waddie's bound feet. Hook Glover lifted him by the shoulders. The old mossy-horned brush bull shied and let out a low, terrified rumble as the two men advanced with their burden. But the big animal was tied securely. As the two men swung their burden under him, the old bull snorted and rolled his eyes. He would have trampled the man to death but for the biting hemp that bound his legs. Hervy Williams had already fashioned two surcingles around the bull—one drawn tight immediately behind the forelegs and up across the huge animal's withers, the other just as far back as possible.

They tied Buck Watson's feet to the front surcingle, his bound wrists to the back one. The waddie hung there then, looking up at the belly of a wild longhorn bull, his back barely off the ground.

It would be a horrible way for a man to die. The boogered steer would run

through brush, thorns, jump logs, mangle a man to death underneath him—and then the torn, bleeding corpse would dangle under the big animal until it was torn off bit by bit—or, perhaps rotted away. . . .

"Anything I can do for you before we start the little rodeo?" Lard Mason squatted down beside the waddie and grinned wickedly. "We allus like to treat our star performers with the best!"

Buck Watson looked hard at the fat man for a long moment. Lard Mason's lips were thick, so that when he talked they moved only slightly. His belly hung down over a heavy belt like rising yeast dough swelling out from a biscuit pan. His face was a streaked red, his clothes rough. When the man laughed it sounded like there were loose stones in his belly.

"Yeah," the young waddie said finally. "I'd like to have a chew of twist plug."

"Want to chew a little while you look at the scenery, eh?" Lard Mason chuckled, tore off a section of twist plug and put it in the waddie's mouth. "It'd be too bad, boys," the fat man turned around to wink at his henchmen, "if Buck here would happen to swallow his cud while goin' over some of the rough spots and it'd make him sick at the stomach! It'd spoil his little joy ride, wouldn't it, boys?" Lard Mason laughed deep down and slapped his fat thigh. His three men grunted slightly, a polite echo of their leader's hilarity.

"Lemme know when you're ready, Boss," "Bugs" Slawson called out gleefully. There was a certain wildness in the man's eyes.

"It won't be long now," Lard Mason said. He looked at Buck then. "We've tried this once before. On a man they called old 'Catgut' Watson, I believe. Old devil wouldn't work with us on a good thing. Guess you might a'heard of the old man?"

♦ ♦ ♦

"YEAH," Buck Watson said with a tired sigh. "I've heard of my pa. I knew him right well for twenty-three years. Then I decided to go out on my own. I didn't hear 'bout you and your vultures movin' in on him in a cattle thiev' deal till it was too late. You thought because he got off on the wrong foot, rode the owl hoot for a year or so

with you when you both were kids that he'd work with you on robbin' the whole valley cattle-pore. I'd never heard of Lard Mason until pa got the goods on you and later they found his scant remains under a lank brahma-longhorn steer. The story finally leaked out then. I hit your trail."

"And we left you for dead, floatin' head down in the Brazos River," Lard Mason finished, a snarl on his face. "That ought to a'learned you to stay 'way from me! It'd a'kept you out of this little joy ride!" The fat man smiled again then. "The Hi-life Cure, as we call it," he continued, eyes showing excitement again, "works like this. For the first few minutes you can draw your head up out of danger. You hold it up just long enough for the rest of your body to get purty well torn up by brush, briars, and logs.

"Then your arms give out and you've got to drop your head. You don't last long then, a'course. And in this Big Thicket here, these old wild bulls roam sometimes for years without havin' a rope thrown on 'em. 'Speck you'll look purty tattered a'fore you tear off piece by piece!"

Buck Watson looked at the red, blood-shot eyes of the man squatting there before him. They were not the eyes of a human. They reminded him more of a starved coyote's burning orbs. He noted the cruel slant of the big man's mouth, the hollow puff of his red cheeks. The waddie looked and a shudder shook his slender frame. Buck Watson knew he was looking into the eyes of a greedy sadist, a man who takes what he wants by force and enjoys seeing men die in order to gorge his own selfish desires.

"I'll tell you why I wanted the tobacco," the waddie said then, his voice low.

"Not that it makes any difference—but why?" Lard Mason's curiosity was aroused slightly.

"Maybe I better show you," Buck Watson said and spit a great mouthful of black, stinging tobacco juice full in Lard Mason's fat, smirking face.

The fat man fell back on his heels. He lost his balance and toppled over on his back, fat fingers clawing at his eyes. "Turn the bull loose!" Lard Mason screamed. "I'll show the damned upstart!"

Hook Glover and Bugs Slawson unloosed the ropes quickly. Herry Williams

reached in his back pocket and brought out a bottle of hi-life. He pulled out the cork and poured a generous portion on the bull's rump. The animal lurched crazily forward. He bawled in terror, slung his great horns. He broke into the heavy brush then, running with an unnatural clumsiness, a lurching sway. Buck Watson swung dizzily under the big animal's belly.

A longhorn bull is a touchy animal about the stomach and flanks. With the two surcingle bits biting into his flesh, the big animal would have stopped to pitch, but the stinging hi-life liquid was driving the huge longhorn on. Eyes wild, tail up, great hoofs pounding, the big animal ran, froth dripping from a mouth that emitted low rumblings of mixed anger and fright.

Buck Watson closed his eyes to the blinding dust, pulled himself up as close under the belly of the lurching animal as possible and gritted his teeth. The bull jumped a gully then. The jolt was terrific. He hit a stretch of haw brush, plunged through a wild plum thicket. The long thorns ripped the waddie's clothes, tore at his flesh.

The log left Buck Watson barely conscious. It had struck him squarely on the back, whacked the living daylight out of his body. They had covered a couple of miles already, he couldn't last another one. He felt limp. His breath was gone. The waddie's arms were tired. Gradually he was sinking down, his head lolling back. Buck Watson knew he wouldn't last long when his head dropped down.

It happened then. The big bull lurched crazily to the side, fell suddenly. The waddie was slammed heavily to the ground. His head spun crazily. There followed a few moments of struggle on the bull's part and then someone was helping Buck Watson get to his feet. He stood up, swaying dizzily.

"You all right?" A girl's voice came from somewhere out there in that dizzy top-spin. The waddie brushed a grimy hand across his eyes. A woman stood there before him—a doggone pretty woman. If she'd just quit circling around off the ground and up into the air, off the ground and up . . .

"Yeah, I'm all right," Buck Watson smiled. "Didn't get a scratch—" He fell

then, fell to the ground with a sigh and lay quiet.

CHAPTER TWO

As Always—Too Late!

BUCK WATSON smelled clean bed sheets. At first he thought he was back home on his old iron bed and mom had just changed the sheets. She always made him take a bath when she changed sheets once a week. Mom was a particular woman. But it wasn't mom that the waddie saw when he opened his eyes. Mom might have looked that way when she was a girl, crowding twenty.

"You got bunged up pretty bad," the girl said. "I had to follow that bull half a mile before the brush cleaned out enough for me to get a rope over those big old horns! If that bull had rolled 'stead of turning a wildcat when I roped him, you'd have that sheet over your head now 'stead of under your chin!"

"Speck I'd a'felt better!" Buck Watson's voice was weak. "Who are you?"

"Frances," the girl stated simply.

"Frances who?"

"Bentley," she answered.

"How in the world come you to be out there in the edge of that Big Thicket when I needed you most?"

The girl's face grew hard. She said, "Folks on this ranch these days don't ask many questions."

"Why?"

The girl's lips tightened. Her voice was impatient. "You need rest, bad. Go to sleep after I tell you this. You're on the Drowsy Water Ranch. Jess Colter, owner. It is located seven miles south of the Big Thicket. I saw you dangling under the belly of a runaway bull. I roped the bull and brought you here. That's as much as a wandering cowpoke needs to know—especially one that's wandered into a mix-up with Lard Mason!"

The girl spun on her heel and slammed the door then.

"Well, I be damned!" Buck Watson said slowly. "She shore is a tempered little hunk o' purty all right!"

When the waddie woke up, it was gloomy in the big room. He had drifted off to sleep, lying there thinking of the girl and of

what she had said. He started to get up. Sore muscles ached, his whole body felt like a mold—just a hull with nothing inside to hold it up. He swayed dizzily on his feet for a moment and sank back on the bed with a little groan.

The door opened then and the girl came in. "You stay in bed—sir!" she said quickly, a wrinkle on her white forehead. "You're bruised and cut all over. You're not even supposed to sit up until tomorrow."

"Don't see how—but it shore is!" Buck Watson said slowly.

"Are you crazy? Don't see how what?"

"Don't see how your skin can stay so white and still you know so much about ropin' and ridin'," he said with a slow smile.

The girl flushed a little. "I'll go get your supper now," she said and left the room.

Buck tried to hold the picture of her blonde hair, the snappy blue eyes, and the light creamy skin in his mind after she had closed the door. The cowboy came back to earth with a start then.

"Well I be damned!" he said aloud. "I been lyin' back here on a soft pillow, comparin' that Frances woman with an angel, and I ain't had room in my mind for nothin' else. Sonofagun! I'm alive!"

The next day Buck Watson sat out on the big ranch house porch in a rocking chair with a pillow to his back. He met grizzled old Jess Colter, owner of the Drowsy Water. And he was introduced to Chuck Reeves. Buck didn't know exactly how to figure out the young, sloe-eyed waddie. Chuck Reeves' voice had not been friendly when he spoke to Buck. He had spoken guardedly, then glanced at the girl, the muscles in his lower jaw flexing.

It was strange to Buck Watson, this Drowsy Water Ranch and the people on it. And it was just as strange three days later when he swung up into the saddle to leave.

"What's up?" The girl was walking toward him from the ranch house.

"I'm able to ride," Buck Watson said. "One of the boys said I could use his horse. I'll leave it at Clay Switch. Shore much obliged for everything you've done!"

"You were leaving without telling me goodbye?" the girl asked, shading her eyes against the mid-morning sun.

"I done 'bout used all my words up thankin' you," Buck Watson said. "Fig-

ured just a 'goodbye' wouldn't help much one way or the other!"

"It would have helped." The girl's eyes were friendly now. "Wait until I get my horse. Let's ride over to where Jess Colter and the boys are dipping some cattle. I believe he'll give you a job!"

"I could use one at that," Buck Watson admitted. "I ain't hardly got a thing on that's mine but my skin!"

"And you left a good deal of that on the thorns and bushes that bull ran over!" The girl laughed and looked up into his eyes.

Buck Watson felt a strange lightness in his stomach. It was working up, rising slowly. He would have figured it to be gas but that wasn't supposed to make a man feel a rosy glow all over!

"I'll saddle your horse," he said, dismounting.

Buck Watson thought as he unlatched the corral gate: *She didn't do nothin' but just smile at me and I felt like jelly from head to foot! I must not be over that bull ride yet!*



THE girl talked as they rode. She talked about the country, riding, ranching and things in general. She didn't talk about what was nearest to Buck Watson's mind—Lard Mason and why her face always went hard at the mention of his name.

Suddenly, as they were about to ride out of the woods and on to a small prairie, the girl pulled her mount short and threw up an arm for silence. The waddie leaned forward in his saddle to get a better view of the little gathering ahead. Lard Mason and his three men were standing there before the dipping vat facing old Jess Colter, owner of the Drowsy Water, and four of his cowboys.

"Lard Mason ain't used to bein' cold-shouldered this a'way, Jess," the fat man

was saying. "I'm just askin' yuh to step aside and talk private with me for a minute or two. I don't even aim to talk about that little Nevada incident!"

Jess Colter stiffened. He seemed to crouch slightly, right hand hovering near his gun. "Git off my ranch, you damned lard barrel!" he hissed. "Git off my land before I bust your scurvy—"

"I don't like to be cold shouldered," Lard Mason cut in and hit Jess Colter full in the face with a ham-like fist. He moved surprisingly fast for one of his weight. The old cattleman fell. Lard Mason was atop him in one jump. Quickly he grasped Jess Colter by the collar. He drug the old cattleman over to the vat then and pushed him under the lower rail. The Drowsy Water owner yelled and cursed as he hit the stinging dip.

At the first sign of action, Hervy Williams had whipped out his gun and held it on the Drowsy Water crew. "It's their fight," he said. "Let's don't have nobody hornin' in!"

Old Jess Colter was spluttering and cursing in the vat. He reached a weather-browned hand up on the cement lip and started to pull himself up. Lard Mason grabbed a prod pole quickly. He started punching the old cattleman's fingers so that he couldn't get a hold on the rough edge long enough to pull his weight up and out of the lime and sulphur dip.

"I better take a hand," Buck Watson said, bogging his spurs. The girl caught his mount's reins quickly. "Hold still," she said in a commanding voice. "You're more valuable to the Drowsy Water with Lard Mason thinking you're dead! One of his men's got the drop anyhow. You wouldn't have a chance. Wait just a minute. When old Jess Colter gets riled, he'll charge hell with a squirt gun! We'll ride in only if it looks serious."

Lard Mason was laughing uproariously. He was fully enjoying the sight of a man

Cliff Farrell, whose fine stories you have read in many POPULAR PUBLICATIONS magazines, will be with us next month with "Rag Town Gets a Gun Doc"—an exciting novelette of a famous surgeon who trades his scalpel for a sixgun. Don't miss it. March 10th is the date!

wallowing in burning dip. He would keep old Jess there until the cattlemen yelled for mercy. Then he'd have that little talk with the Drowsy Water owner like he'd planned all along.

Mason's men were grinning sullenly.

Suddenly old Jess Colter grabbed the prod pole. He yanked hard. Lard Mason's hold broke. The old cattleman brought himself up out of the vat quickly then. He climbed the railing. Lard Mason stood there, hands on his hips, grinning wickedly.

Old Jess Colter made like he was going to pitch the prod pole away as he climbed down from the railing. He wheeled suddenly then and brought it down hard on the fat man's head. Lard Mason reeled backward. He tripped up on Hervy Williams and they both went down. The other two henchmen had to duck deftly to get out of the way.

During that brief moment of unexpected reverse for the Mason gang, Sump Dunaway jerked out his heavy .45 and stepped forward. Hervy Williams had dropped his gun. "Let's still don't have any hornin' in," Sump said as the men looked up, startled.

As Lard Mason rose, old Jess Colter hit him again with the short pole. It put the old blowhard to his knees. He caught hold of the vat railing to steady himself, his head doddering up and down like a locoed horse boogering at a ground hog. The Drowsy Water owner stepped up quickly then, grabbed Lard Mason by the collar and the seat of his pants and slid him under the railing. The fat man's pants split wide open as he went under. He screamed as the burning dip struck his sensitive skin.

"You see what I mean!" Frances Bentley turned her head toward Buck Watson. She was smiling.

"Yeah, I see," the waddie said slowly. He was watching the drenched figure of Lard Mason come out of the chute, listening to the big man curse. He saw the Mason crew mount and ride away then under menacing muzzles of Drowsy Water guns.

"Yeah, I see," he repeated. "But it probably means a bullet in the back for old Jess Colter. I know how Lard Mason works..."

"Maybe for somebody else too." The girl's face suddenly went dark.

Buck Watson saw Chuck Reeves in the group then. He winced inwardly at the concern this girl showed over him. He'd

seen the two together often during the last three days. Buck Watson guessed he was the kind of a fellow that always got in on a good thing too late. Frances Bentley and Chuck Reeves were evidently already engaged. He was standing outside in the cold rain without a slicker, like he always was. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

No Trail Back

FOUR days passed with no sign of the Lard Mason gang. They were four busy days. Old Jess Colter had given Buck a job with a smile. "Anybody who's a big enough enemy of Lard Mason to get strung under a bull," he chuckled, "is a friend of mine!"

The Drowsy Water boys were working overtime, rounding up a hundred beef steers that old Jess had kept on winter grass. They were in prime condition now and ready to sell. On the fourth day after the dipping vat episode, the boys seemed to relax and the whole ranch seemed more cheerful. It would be a four day job, the long drive to Clay Switch and back. But there would be one glorious night in the big saloon at the little siding. Liquor would flow free. The Drowsy Water boys would relax, make up for long hours in the saddle on dusty trails.

Buck Watson rode out with the drive at sun-up the next morning. Jess Colter suggested that he stay behind but the waddie felt his old self again. He was ready for the trail. There was a certain excitement to a drive like this that he didn't want to miss. He'd plan out his next move against Lard Mason after he got back.

Frances Bentley took the trail also. She enjoyed a drive as well as any of the boys, and, too, Jess Colter didn't want her to stay back at the ranch with only old Judson, the negro cook, for protection. He didn't put Lard Mason above anything.

Jess Colter had been torn between two decisions on this drive. If he didn't leave someone behind to watch after the ranch, Lard Mason might run off some stock. And if he didn't take along every available hand on the drive, the fat man might try bushwhacking the trail hands and making off with the cream of Drowsy Water prime

beef. It would be easier that way. The cattle were rounded up and ready to drive—not spread out over twenty thousand acres of rough rangeland.

Splitting the hands up would make too few on either end. So the Drowsy Water owner played his cards with the prize beef herd. He told old Judson to bring him word if anything went wrong. The Mason gang had been quiet for the last four days. Maybe, Jess Colter thought, that little incident at the dipping vat had shown Lard Mason just how the Drowsy Water owner stood.

A little streak of excitement waved up Buck Watson's backbone as Frances Bentley rode up to the milling herd. The first rays of a rising sun caught her gold hair. It seemed to radiate an electric sheen of crimson brilliance. Her face was flushed. Her light shirt rose and fell from the girl's breathing, quickened with the flush of excitement. Buck Watson noted the sleek limbs with the checked riding skirt drawn tight across them. His stomach was feeling funny inside again.

"G'mornin'!" he said and smiled. "You look mighty peart!"

"A tall, brown-eyed, black haired, broad-shouldered, square-jawed man of about twenty-five years old that I know doesn't look so bad himself!" the girl said teasingly. "Even if those borrowed clothes don't fit you right in places!" She laughed lightly and turned to an approaching rider.

"I'll watch out after you on the drive," Chuck Reeves said as he pulled his mount short beside the girl's horse. He shifted Buck Watson an unfriendly glance.

Dust rose high in the air as the herd got under way. Busy cowhands hollered at the cattle, spurred out to the side to hem in strays. The rattle of hocks, the pound of hooves rose to a steady din. Smell of moving cattle permeated the air. Buck Watson sat back in his saddle and smiled. This was the life he enjoyed. He'd be glad when that trail of revenge ended, and he could live with free thoughts again. The young waddie had no idea when it would be over but he knew one thing—it would end only with a bullet in his own belly or the death of Lard Mason.

The sun was riding high toward midday when old Judson caught up with the drive on a lathered mount. "Massah Boss!"

he called out to old Jess Colter. "Dat man's at the ranch what gonna buy dem blooded breedin' bulls. He want'um today. He say he needum on the ranch right now."

Old Jess Colter frowned. "Gawd-mighty!" he complained. "He would come today!" He turned to the girl. "Better come along with me, Frances. We can stay over at the ranch tonight and catch up tomorrow before the boys get there. Old Jake Moses is offerin' me a good price for them bulls!"



IN another half hour they pulled the herd to a stop for water and a short rest on the banks of a shallow creek. The cowhands took this opportunity to eat a cold snack.

Buck Watson's food had no taste. He was worried. It looked all right. Lard Mason couldn't possibly know that Jake Moses intended to buy the bulls. It would be a good trick though if he did. . .

As they drove through a little draw, Buck Watson got lost off from the herd. He might be silly, he might get fired for leaving the drive, but damned if he wasn't going to follow out a hunch one time in his life!

No one answered from within the ranch-house when the waddie rode up and hailed. That was queer—damned queer! Old Judson and the girl ought to be there. What would they be doing out helping round up a bunch of blooded bulls?

Biting concern caused Buck Watson's heart to pound heavily. He didn't know which way to turn. Something was amiss but he didn't know just how to go about putting his hand on it.

He heard it then, a low moan came from the back yard behind the rambling house. He rode around the split willow yard fence quickly. Old Judson sat up against the big post oak tree in the back yard, black hands red as they clasped tight over his stomach.

Buck Watson jumped from his saddle, vaulted the fence and held the old black man's head in his arms. "What is it, Judson? What's happened? Who shot you?"

Old Judson was weak. His breath came in short gasps. His voice was faint. "Fat man and his men come—git Miss Frances—shoot me in th' belly!"

"Where'd he take her, Judson!"

"Ah doan know suh—" old Judson closed his eyes. "Boss staht down to Little Woods Pasture. Aftah he gone—"

The old darkie breathed hard twice. He lay still then.

Buck Watson placed the old man gently on the tiny back gallery and drew a wagon tarp over him. It had probably taken old Judson an hour to die. Buck had heard about the Mason gang method. If they couldn't work out some fiendish trick to kill a man by degrees where they could watch, they shot him in the belly so that he would die slowly. It was a type of love for effecting death and for the victim to know that he was going to die. This was Lard Mason's specialty.

Buck Watson mounted his horse and rode hard for the Little Woods Pasture. Halfway across a little glade just before the waddie reached his destination, the big roan he was riding shied suddenly. Buck Watson pulled him short, stared open mouthed at old Jess Colter.

The Drowsy Water owner was propped up against a small mesquite bush, shirt off, his chest red with blood. There was a stricken look about the old man's face.

The waddie slid out of his saddle and dropped his reins. He ran toward the old man with a little cry of concern. "What's happened, Boss? Who shot you? Who did this to you?"

Old Jess Colter's lips seemed to be partly paralyzed. He talked slowly, yet with a desperate urge to get it all said. "I'm not shot," he said. "Rattler bit. Two of 'em. Lard Mason's men. Got the drop on me, roped me in, pulled off my shirt and drug me across two rattlers they turned loose out of a sack. They had it all planned out in advance. Got bit four times in the body. I tried to slit the bites with my knife so some of the poison would run out, but I ain't got a chance, Buck. I got t' talk fast. I got a lot t' tell. Listen, boy. Get every word. Then go back quick and see that they don't bother Frances!" The waddie nodded. He didn't have the heart to tell old Jess that the girl had already been taken.

"Lard Mason," the old man continued, "found out some way about a little affair that happened back in my young days in Nevada. I'm still wanted back there I guess. I killed a man. It was accidental,

but his friends held all the cards in that town. Lard Mason was holding this over me. I'd heard of him before he showed up. He's a man that eases hisself in on a ranch, gets something on the owner, his son, one of the family, or even the fo'man, and holds this agin' him to keep him quiet. He uses the ranch then, which is known to be run by honest folks, as headquarters for his thievin'. Steals cattle for miles around and keeps them on a range where nobody would think to look for them. Slick game. They knew every move we made on this ranch. They got one of my boys workin' with them but I don't know which.

"I wouldn't play Mason's game so I got this," the old man sighed. His voice was growing weak. "Go back to Frances now," a look of grave concern showed in his mealy old eyes. "She's my niece. Chuck Reeves is a sort of nephew. They get the ranch when I'm gone."

"I'm not going to leave you here!" Buck Watson said with finality. He picked the old man up in his arms. "I'll take you to the ranch house. Maybe I can do somethin' in time."

"Never mind, son"—the old man's voice was barely audible. He slumped lifeless in Buck Watson's arms then.

The waddie placed his burden gently back down under the little mesquite bush. He pulled off his hat and said: "I'll get him for you, Jess. I'll get him for you, for pa, and for me—or I'll get a bullet in the belly tryin'!"

Buck Watson got on his horse then and rode down the trail.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lard Calls the Odds

THE waddie was dazed. So much brutal, fiendish killing for so little apparent reason made him sick at the stomach. Buck realized that he was riding into a den of mentally unbalanced maniacs—men who liked to take life for the sake of seeing their victim suffer. It made the waddie's scalp shift on his head.

The trail showed fresh signs. Two horses had gone down it at a fast pace. At Panther Creek Crossing another horseman joined the two. Buck didn't understand this.

The waddie rode with increased awareness. The hideout would probably be several miles back within the Big Thicket, but it always paid to watch corners when you dealt with Lard Mason. Buck tried not to think of what would happen when he, a lone hand, rode in on the wolf pack. He was concerned more right now with the thought that maybe they took precautions in getting to their hideout. Maybe he couldn't follow the trail. Without signs to lead him, the waddie would never find it in the mass of thick undergrowth, the endless tract of vines and tangles.

Buck Watson pulled up with a jolt then. He saw Chuck Reeves sitting in the trail, motioning wildly. Chuck had one hand clasped tightly over his stomach. It was getting to be a familiar sign.

The waddie rode up quickly and dismounted.

"Watch out!" Chuck Reeves warned. Buck Watson wheeled to see a scar-faced man he did not know walk from behind a cluster of dogwood bushes, a .44 in his hand. Another appeared from the other side of the trail.

"That does it!" Chuck Reeves moaned. "I tried to motion you back. They left me in the trail here for bait when they heard someone coming."

"You hurt bad?" Buck asked.

"Dyin'. Slowly," Chuck Reeves said. "Shot in the belly by the fat hound himself. Lord, how could I ever a'got mixed up with this filthy crew!"

He dived for the scar-faced man's legs then. The two had walked up close. Buck Watson hit the other man hard with a back handed slap, and made a quick left sided dive, his right hand clawing leather. A shot screamed after him, missed and ricocheted off a nearby black jack tree with an angry buzz.

The two henchmen hadn't expected this play from a dying man. Surprise and sudden action by Buck had caught them off guard. The scar-faced man leaped backward, snapping a shot at the waddie as he went. The other, a big build man with red hair, turned quickly to send a slug after Buck Watson and slid behind a wide-bowled post oak at the same time. Part of his big body was already behind the tree when the waddie's bullet caught him in the neck. The red-headed man rose to his full

length, left hand clutching at his throat, a shocked expression crowding the grim intent from his face. His heavy gun fell from a nerveless right hand then. He slumped to the ground in slow motion.

Buck Watson took a bullet in his left leg as he wheeled. The slug shocked him momentarily. The waddie stumbled, sank to his right knee. There was a gleam in the scar-faced man's eyes now. He brought back the curved hammer of his big .44 for the kill. Buck steadied himself deliberately and fired quickly.

The scar-faced man took a slug in the chest, bowed over and coughed. He straightened up then and tried to bring the big gun in line. It was ready for shooting, the hammer already back. The man's knees buckled then. He jerked the trigger desperately as he fell. The wild bullet tore a ripping gash in the ground at Buck Watson's feet.

Chuck Reeves lay on his side on the sandy ground. "Help me on a horse!" he said. "Get one of theirs behind the dogwood clump yonder!"

Buck Watson got the horse without question. He also rounded up his own mount which had shied off at the shooting.

"Help me off with my shirt," Chuck Reeves said. "Then tie it tight around my stomach. If I'm lucky I'll put a bullet in that fat dog's filthy hide yet. At least, I got to last until I can show you the hideout. They've got Frances. How's your leg?"

"Flesh wound," Buck said quickly. "Won't bother me much."

"Let's get going then," the dying man said. "I can talk as we go. Better stick their two guns in your belt—we might need 'em. The fat ox took mine."



CHUCK REEVES gritted his teeth to the jolting motions of the fox-trotting horse. "You'd never find the hideout if you didn't know where to look," he said. "Me," the boy tried to smile ironically. "I'm one of 'em, you might say! I'll tell it fast. I don't feel much like talkin'."

"Frances Bentley is my half sister. Pa lost everything we had in a card game one night when he'd hit the bottle a little too hard. Got shot tryin' to get it back. Jess

Colter insisted that we live with him. He's Frances' uncle—her mother's side. Me and her had different mothers, see, but the same pa. She was by his last wife.

"Everything went fine until I got to hitting the jug Saturday nights a little too hard myself. Got in debt. Needed some money bad. Took a loan from Lard Mason. Didn't know much about him. He kept on till he got his claws into me good and proper. Little by little then, through me he found out about Jess Colter and other things he wanted to know about the ranch. Told me he wanted to use it as a way station for cattle he aimed to buy. He made his headquarters out in the Big Thicket then. He knew he had me goin' his way. I kept tellin' him more and more and finally he got me to tell him about Jess Colter's Nevada shootin'. I'd ride out to the hide-out and report. Frances got suspicious. She followed me once. That's when she brought you in. You pretty well know the rest. Hell, I didn't mean to cause all this trouble! I just got roped in before I knew it.

"Today I was supposed to meet them at Panther Creek Crossing. After the bribe didn't work, Lard told me he'd take a few Drowsy Water cattle and clear out. I made him promise to meet me at the Crossing. I wanted to see that he didn't make a big haul. I figured I could explain my absence from the drive some way and that I could pay old Jess back for the cattle over a period of time in one way or another. I was glad to get rid of Lard Mason even at the cost of a few rustled cattle.

"When two new men rode up to the Crossing, I thought something funny. They said we'd meet the others at Sand Trails Crossing. That's where you found me. Lard had hired three new scalawags. He had Frances with him. He grinned and told his men to cover me. The two vultures we shot back there reported on how they killed old Jess.

"It made me see red. Frances fought them like a wildcat. He told four of his men to take her and ride on. When they got out of earshot, he pulled out his damned shiny-handled .38 and calmly shot me full in the belly! Then, while I was doubled up on the ground in pain, Lard Mason told me his full plans.

"When he got through, he left, tellin' the

two remainin' men to stay away from camp and to dump me in a gully when I died. He wanted Frances to think I had two guards who would shoot me if she didn't do what he wanted her to." Chuck Reeves stopped for a moment. The man was breathing heavily. The knuckles of his right hand shone white as he clinched the saddle biscuit. He continued then.

"Lard Mason figures on goin' the whole hog this time. His old tricks ain't workin' so well any more. So he figures to get settled for life. Frances gets the ranch when Jess Colter dies. Lard hatched up the bull buyin' deal.

"I'd mentioned it for some reason. He had two of his men kill old Jess then so that it would look like he tripped and fell on a rattler. He shot the old negro and left him there to die slowly. They'd hide his body when they got back later. He's already got a license and he aims to ride across the Big Thicket and get married in Milano tomorrow. He'll make Frances marry him by threatenin' her with my death. She'll believe him too after what he did to old Jess.

"Then Lard and his men will ride back to the Drowsy Water, him the new boss. He'll say that when they left, old Jess was all right and gave his consent for them to marry. It'll look like the old rancher stumbled and fell on a rattler while they were gone. Then Lard'll say they took Judson with them.

"That he decided to leave on the train for his folks back in Alabama like he's been threatenin' to do. He'll scare Frances into being quiet by saying he's got me where he can get his hands on me at any time, but as long as she's quiet he'll let me alone.

"It's a madman's scheme, but crazier things have been known to work. He'll have plenty of time to do all this during the four days the Drowsy Water boys are away on the drive. They'll come back to find him and his hoodlums firmly entrenched. He'll fire them sayin' he's got his own men.

"The law'll investigate, maybe raise hell in general, but if they can't get their fingers on nothin', what're they gonna do?" Chuck Reeves shuddered. His face was white now. He swayed slightly in the saddle. "Take this left hand turn here through the wild cane brake," he said. "I got to last till we get there!" He hung on grimly.

THEY were in the wildest section of the Big Thicket now. The trees grew closer together. They were interlaced by great spreads of grapevine growths.

"Take it quiet from now on," Chuck Reeves said and quit talking.

They rode through the silent woods. Red-gold rays of a slanting sun found little holes in the forest wall and sewed threads of luminous crimson through the gloomy shadows. Buck Watson felt a shiver creep up his backbone. Riding this far back in the mysterious, gloomy Big Thicket gave a man the creeps. It was as if he was in another world. Things didn't seem real.

Chuck Reeves brought his mount to a halt then. His pain-wracked body slumped in the saddle. "We better leave the horses here," he said. "Help me down."

The dying man looked at Buck Watson then. "This ain't your fight, cowboy. It's 'bout the same as us walkin' into a den of rattlers. Surprisin' 'em'll be the only thing in our favor. Me, I don't mind it. I'm gonna die anyhow. It's different with you."

"Mason killed my pa like he tried to kill me," Buck Watson said simply.

The hole in Chuck Reeves' belly had soaked the shirt bandage with blood. The man's hair was disheveled, his clothes torn and ripped. He looked like a dying wild man standing there in the heavy gloom. He held out a blood-stained hand then and smiled grimly. Buck Watson clasped the man's hand, grinned back. It was the first time Chuck Reeves had ever smiled at him.

"Come on then," the wounded man said. "Let's get goin'!"

Buck Watson helped the man cripple through the heavy undergrowth. His own wound began to hurt now. Blood soaked the left leg of his heavy brown ducking breeches, streaked down the slick surface of his bullhide chaps. He had lost the battered Stetson that one of the Drowsy Water boys had given him. His black hair hung in loose disarray. Wide shoulders showed brown skin through rips made by the dense brush. There was a certain firmness to Buck Watson's square jaws now. His black eyes held a grim light as he thought of the task ahead.

After a hundred yard walk, Chuck Reeves grasped the waddie's arm and pointed ahead. "That's it!" he said. "In that

little clearin'." The man's eyes burned bright with excitement. "I'm gonna make it! A stomach shot, 'specially when made by a measly .38, is a long time killin' a man!"

Buck Watson was peering intently ahead. "I don't see a damned thing!" he said.

"That's why I said you'd never find it if you didn't know what to look for. A man could ride within ten yards of it and pass right on by! Y'see that heavy clump of yaupon yonder?" Chuck Reeves lifted a shaky finger and pointed ahead.

"Yeah."

"That's it!"

"You mean—"

"Y'know how thick a yaupon clump can grow in ordinary country? Well, they grow twice as thick in this wild scramble of trees and vines. Lard Mason and his men cut out the heart of that clump. Made a big room in there. Spread matted grapevines over the top. Even got a corral for their horses cut out separate and to the side. It's a bush standing up there in front that covers the entrance. Slickest hideout I ever saw!"

They moved forward quietly. Chuck Reeves stopped at a sprawling post oak at the edge of the clearing. "Give me one of them guns in your belt," he said.

Buck Watson then handed him a .44 and the wounded man sat flat on the ground. He raised the heavy gun and rested it between the forked runners of a grapevine limb. "With a rest like this," he said, "I can kill anything that comes out the front entrance. You sidle over behind that black jack yonder and cover the side entrance. I'll start the show!"

Buck Watson complied quickly. He was in position behind the black jack to cover the side entrance as well as see what went on out front.

The waddie was surprised at the strength of Chuck Reeves' voice when it came.

"Lard!" the wounded man called. "Reeves ain't dead yet. Ain't no use to let him suffer no longer. Want us to plug him?" Chuck Reeves had effectively changed the sound of his voice.

"Fool!" Lard Mason said as the bush burst away and he stood in the entrance. "I told you—"

Lard Mason got it then. He got it in the belly, too. His sentence died off as the big

man sucked in his breath in surprise. He grunted when the bullet spanged against the fat of his enormous belly. He clasped the wound with both hands, looked blankly at the little puff of blue smoke drifting away from the vine-covered post oak tree. Lard Mason sat down then.

A tall, bearded gunster appeared at the entrance then, .45 in hand. He looked down at Lard Mason and his under jaw sagged. The tall man got a bullet in the heart then as he turned to look for a target.

"That cleans out the gang's new men!" Chuck Reeves said.

Hook Glover and Hervy Williams rushed out the side entrance then. They were bent on flanking the frontal attack. Buck Watson stepped out from behind his oak tree blind suddenly, gun drawn.

Hervy Williams exclaimed, "We've killed that man twice!" He swung the heavy gun around then and snapped a quick shot at Buck Watson. Surprise sent the slug wild. Hook Glover went into action then.

The two men were standing close together. Buck Watson fanned his gun. He shot six times so fast the sounds blended into one roar. Hook Glover fell on his face and lay still. Hervy Williams was knocked off his feet, his gun sliding across the sand. He shook the shock from his head then and reached for the smoking .45. He was stunned, but still able to shoot. Buck Watson dropped the empty .44 in his hand, pulled his own gun from its holster. Both men shot at the same time. Hervy Williams took a slug in his chest. He sunk slowly to a sitting posture, then toppled over on his face.

"Always wanted to see how that gun-fannin' worked," Chuck Reeves spoke up from behind the oak tree.

Buck Watson stood facing the side entrance. "First time I ever tried it!" he confessed. "Had to do somethin' with two shootin' at me at once!" The waddie realized then that he had been hit. His right side felt like a mule had kicked him. The slug had probably buckled a rib.

Bugs Slawson came out then. There was a wild light in the man's eyes. He was frightened, dazed, all bawled up over the sudden, unexpected shooting. He saw Buck Watson and stopped in his tracks.

"Catgut Watson!" he exclaimed. "You been follerin' me around for a year now.

I knowed you wasn't dead. You quit follerin' me! I'm gonna kill you now so you'll quit follerin' me!" The madman walked toward Buck Watson, shooting deliberately. His slight string of rational thinking had broken amid the tumult and at the sight of what he thought was Buck's father—a man he had helped kill over a year ago.

Buck Watson's first bullet missed completely. He shot twice more in rapid succession, took a slug through his left arm. Bugs Slawson was bent low now in a gunman's crouch, a greenish glaze in his wild eyes. The two slugs had hit him solidly, but he still walked forward.

The waddie's fourth shot took Bugs Slawson squarely in the chest. He staggered back, swayed drunkenly, tried to pull back the curved hammer of his smoking .45. The big weapon grew heavy in his hand then. Bugs Slawson slumped to the ground with a sigh.

Buck Watson heard the girl scream then. He felt icy fear knot tight in his stomach. He started for the side entrance at a wobbly trot.

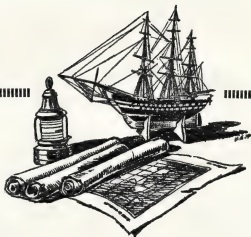
The gloom was heavy inside, but he could see a light in the big room. He worked forward feverishly. Lard Mason was on his hands and knees, crawling toward Frances Bentley. The girl stood in the far corner of the big room. Her hands were bound.

Lard Mason lay on his bleeding belly and raised his shiny .38 as Buck Watson entered. The waddie jumped aside quickly, snapped a shot at the big man. The move saved his life. A bullet tore into the flesh between his right hip and lower rib. Four inches more toward the center and it would have been what Lard Mason intended it to be—a belly shot.

Shock carried Buck Watson to his knees. He eared back the hammer on his gun quickly, jerked the trigger. The sharp, metallic click drove an arrow of cold fear through his heart. A wild, hollow chuckle came from Lard Mason's throat. There was a feverish brightness to his eyes now as the fat man raised his gun for the kill.

"I heard Bugs call you Catgut outside," the fat man said. "You do look a little mussed up. I've tried to kill you twice, Buck Watson," the big man's lips tightened. "This time I'll make sure of the job!"

But Watson was surprised when the



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crashing report that followed brought no further shock to his body. He saw the big man wince. Lard Mason's lips pulled tight as his fat body absorbed the shock. It seemed to paralyze him completely for a moment. The white-handled .38 dropped from his hand. He pulled himself around in a half turn then and looked at Chuck Reeves.

"You oughtn't to shoot folks in the belly, Lard," the man was saying. "They might live long enough to muss up your plans!" Chuck Reeves had come through the front entrance. He stood there swaying, leaning against the cropped yaupon brush wall. There was a smile of deep satisfaction on his face. "An' bein' so lardy," Chuck Reeves continued, "you'd nacherly die slower. The layers of fat sort of close over the bullet hole."

The big man did not answer. He died with a look of defeat on his face. . . .

BUCK WATSON smelled clean sheets when he got behind his eyes again. He hollered "Hey!" and hurt in five places at one time.

"Be quiet!" Frances Bentley said, bursting into the big room. "You're the shot-uptest man I ever scraped up off the ground and brought home wrapped up in a saddle blanket!"

"Did Chuck—?"

"He died, yes." The girl's eyes were sad. "But not before he dragged himself over and untied my wrists. He—he told me everything. I had suspected for some time. After I took care of you, I rode over to the Box R. Sam Taylor and his boys are here. We'll take care of everything all right. One has gone to Clay Switch after a doctor and our boys. The doc will fix you up proper. You need some rest now and I've—got some things to do—" Two trickles of moisture made wet paths down the girl's cheeks. She turned and left the room then. . . .

Three weeks later Buck Watson climbed into the saddle and looked sadly at the big Drowsy Water ranch-house.

"Just where do you think you're going, young man?" Frances Bentley called from the corral fence.

"I, I, that is, well—"

"Fixin' to leave again without saying

good-by, eh?" the girl said. Her tone was accusing. "What's the matter with you, man? Are you a blamed woman-hater?"

"It ain't that," Buck Watson stammered. "I just, well, I told Sump what to tell you after I left. I'm sort of—that is, my mouth feels like it's full of creek rocks when I try to tell someone—that is, a woman, good-by. I—"

"It's full of rocks now, isn't it, cowboy?" The girl smiled. "Sump told me what you said an hour ago. I just wanted to see if that's all I meant to you—pulling out without even saying good-by."

"You mean a lot, that is—well, dammit, woman, don't you see? I ain't the kind of a man that sparks a gal who's just inherited a ranch worth a fortune. I ain't got a cent. It'd rub my fur the wrong way!"

"I swear!" the girl exclaimed. "I never saw such a fool man! I rescue you from under the belly of a *bersak* bull. I nurse you back to health. I get you a job here. Then you get shot up, and I gather you up piece by piece and bring you home. I patch you up, wait on you hand and foot, worry my fool self sick wondering if you're gonna be all right. Then you got the gall to climb on that mangy roan and start out from here without saying good-by! You're gonna ride that horse over to this fence and kiss me goodby or I swear I'll make you walk!"

Buck Watson blushed deeply. He pulled the roan up next to the fence and bent over. The girl's arms went around his neck. He felt a strange surge of elation as her lips met his. The roan started edging away from the fence then. The girl kept her hold around the waddie's neck. She was nudging the horse firmly with the toe of a small boot. The animal flinched, sidled away. The movement left Buck Watson on the fence, the girl's arms still around his neck.

"You're a heck of a cowboy!" Frances Bentley smiled. "Falling off a horse and him standing stock still! What a Drowsy Water Ranch owner you'll make! Besides, it ruined our kiss."

Buck Watson was trembling all over. The blood was pounding in his head. That feeling was there in his stomach again. "Let's get down off the fence," he said. "I want to kiss you proper." The waddie smiled slowly. "I can learn to ride later!"

THE END

THE DEVIL'S PAYCHECK

"The wolves will get you!" gloated Skull.



Skull Gort never figured that a man could step right out of a sprung bear trap and walk away unscathed. But then Skull had never met a gent like Old Bill!

By
**GUNNISON
STEELE**

WITH devilish cunning Skull Gort fashioned his death-trap. The bear trap weighed all of forty pounds, and it took all his massive strength to pry apart its wicked sawtooth jaws. The spot he had chosen for it was between two boulders that were hemmed closely on two sides by dense thickets, so that only by a miracle would the man following his trail escape the trap.

Gort very carefully raked loose red sand over the bear trap, and over this he placed a coating of pine needles and dead leaves. Then he craftily rearranged twigs and

leaves, erasing all signs of his presence except the normal tracks he would make in walking between the boulders. It was a good job, and Skull Gort chuckled, and the wind in the dark towering firs and pines seemed to chuckle with him in grisly anticipation.

The man trailing him was not very far behind, he knew. It was a wiry, gray-bearded little old man who limped when he walked. His name, Gort remembered, was Limpy Bill Ames. Gort, foraging the highlands far to the south of his hideout in search of anything of worth, had come upon Limpy Bill's cabin at sunset. Limpy Bill had welcomed him eagerly, insisting that he spend the night, trustingly revealing to Gort the small hoard of gold nuggets he had panned from the nearby creek.

So Gort had shot him and stolen the gold.

Gort had left quickly, thinking the oldster was dead. But early this morning, on the second day, he had discovered Limpy Bill on his backtrail. Limpy Bill had been coming along like an old hound with its nose to the ground, a long-barreled old rifle cradled in his arm, vengefully intent on tracking down the man who had repaid his generosity with treachery. Instantly, Skull Gort had decided what to do.

Skull Gort—dark, powerful—could have broken the wiry oldster in two with his hands; or he could simply have shot Limpy Bill from ambush. But either might have drawn unwelcome attention to himself. He knew these vast highlands, and he had various kinds of caches over them. He remembered where a bear trap was cached. So he hadn't let Limpy Bill suspect his presence back there was known; he had lured the oldster on, until now it was almost sundown.

Gort went on between the boulders, careful to avoid the monstrous thing hidden beneath the dirt and leaves, and went on for another hundred feet. There, behind an upthrust slab of rock, he concealed himself and waited. This time there wouldn't be any mistake about the old one dying; and the way he died would make it appear like an accident to anybody who might find his bleaching bones in the future.

He didn't have to wait long. He heard a twig snap, and then he saw Limpy Bill Ames coming slowly along. Here the

mighty firs fashioned a dark canopy high above, and in the cool shadows that shrouded the ground below the oldster looked like a gnome with a blood-stained bandage about its white head. Limpy Bill trod silently, stealthily, limping a little, his bearded face sharp and alert.

Limpy Bill came up to the boulders. He eyed them sharply, suspiciously. Then, apparently deciding that they held no danger, he darted over the carpet of leaves and twigs between them.

Gort, watching, saw a wild flurry among the leaves; he heard a snarling, snapping sound. He saw Limpy Bill fling himself wildly backward. But the oldster was too late. The wicked, serrated jaws of the trap had him, and it flung him violently to the ground. Limpy Bill didn't struggle. He lay still, moaning softly, looking down at the thing that had him just below the knee. In the wild flurry his rifle had been flung twenty feet away.

Gort laughed, and Limpy Bill looked toward him. Only Gort's head and shoulders showed, for Limpy Bill still had his belt gun.

Gort called, "So, old man, you wasn't satisfied with just losin' your gold—you had to lose your life too!"

Limpy Bill stared at him in bitter-eyed silence.

"Not talkin', huh?" Gort jeered. "It was a dumb trick, followin' me up here. Now you're finished."

Limpy Bill said bitterly, "You took my gold, and tried to kill me, after I'd took you in. The gold don't matter so much."

"Not to you, mebbly. I could have shot you, old man—and still can—but I got a better way."

"What you aimin' to do?"

"Nothin'—nothin' a'tall. I aim to just leave you there in that bear trap. You can't get loose, because it was made to hold the biggest grizzly that ever lived. You'll stay there and starve, or freeze, or the wolves will get you. Sometime, mebbly, somebody'll find what's left of you, and they'll say, 'Poor cuss, he stumbled into a bear trap and couldn't get loose!' That'll give you somethin' to think about."

Limpy Bill said hoarsely, "I—you wouldn't do that, surely. That'd be worse than murder. You've got the gold—"

"I've got you, too! You've got a gun

there. Mebby you'll want to use it after a while. Or mebby you could shoot yourself loose. That wouldn't make any difference. Your leg'd be broken, chewed to pieces. You'd still starve, or freeze, or the wolves'd get you. No use arguin', old man—you ain't got a chance!"



LIMPY BILL yelled, "You murderin' snake!" and, incredibly quick, he grabbed his old Peacemaker and smashed three swift shots at Skull Gort.

But Gort had anticipated the move, and he ducked down behind the rock, laughing jeeringly.

He crawled backward, gained the shelter of a ridge, got to his feet and headed northward. The sun went down, and quick dusk came to the highlands; a chill wind rose and moaned through the forest. But Skull Gort didn't stop until he'd gone several miles. Then he paused beside a tinkling little stream and kindled a fire.

As he prepared a meal, Skull Gort was permeated by a sense of well-being and safety. He knew the heights as the wild creatures knew them, and it seemed that they had been made for him; here, only the cunning and the strong survived. Limpy Bill had been stupid.

A twig snapped on the edge of the circle of firelight. Gort, gobbling the food, turned

his head—and a shocked, startled look touched his evil face as he saw the gnome-like figure of Limpy Bill standing there. Limpy Bill had the long old rifle in his hands, and it was lined on Gort.

Limpy Bill said flatly, "You better stay mighty still, killer, or I'll blow you plumb apart!"

Gort somersaulted backward, grabbing wildly for his own gun. He saw flame leap out at him, heard the blasting boom of Limpy Bill's gun, and he felt the smashing impact of lead against his side. He forgot about his gun. He lay there, moaning and whimpering, looking dazedly up at Limpy Bill.

"Anybody that'd do what you done ain't fit to live," Limpy Bill said. "Try another trick and you won't!"

Gort moaned, "How'd you get outa that bear trap, old man?"

"I took my leg off. Then I pried open the trap jaws with my rifle barrel, took my leg out and put it back on. Then I took out after you ag'in.

"You done—*what?*"

Limpy Bill tapped his leg below the knee with the gun-barrel, and it gave out a dead, wooden sound.

"One thing about a bear trap," Limpy Bill said grimly. "Once you get a leg caught in one, like I did twenty years ago, you don't have to worry about that same leg bein' caught ag'in!"

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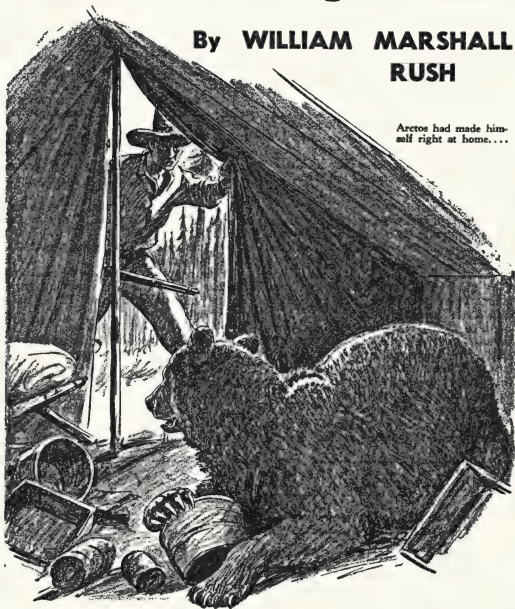
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Feud of the Fanged Killer

By WILLIAM MARSHALL
RUSH

Arctos had made himself right at home...



Shepherd Carlo liked his feud with Arctos, golden-coated bear of the high-pine country—but he neglected to tell the bear that it was a game.

ARCTOS' nose wrinkled at the rancid odor of wool grease that came down the southwest breeze in advance of a crawling flock of sheep. He came down from the high fir tree and climbed the shoulder of a ridge where he could look out over a small valley. There the smell was still stronger, more unpleasant. He

could hear the marching horde, a low monotonous murmur that swelled louder each moment until it was a meaningless din of blatting sheep, barking dogs and shouting men.

Arctos saw them pour out of the edge of forest onto a stretch of grassland near the creek, a tumbling, squirming mass of bah-bahing, dingy-coated mother sheep and their bleating, snow-white lambs. They scattered to nibble at the tender grass and sweet-smelling flowers and Arctos ambled uncertainly for a closer view.

It was all very strange. A strong urge came over him to retreat far back into the mountains where he was born. He started to obey it, hesitated, then came back to sniff, to listen and look.

Two men appeared with horses and made camp almost under his very nose. The two-legged animals had an ominous smell and again Arctos trotted into the deep forest, only to stop and pad slowly back. He had never seen or smelled men before, yet they frightened him. The strong desire to run from them struggled with desire to learn about these queer-looking, strong-smelling creatures. Curiosity won. He stayed to watch, to move even closer, to sniff. He heard their voices. It would have been well if Arctos had understood what they said, for they were talking about him.

"I got to leave you now, Carlo. You'll have to look out for yourself till I come back."

"Carlo'll get along. Carlo was shepherd in Gascony. Carlo'll take good care of the flock."

"Watch out for bears. Shoot all you see."

"Bears? No bears in Gascony."

"There's a lot of 'em here, great big black fellers that sneak around an' kill sheep."

"Carlo will shoot bears!"

One of the men kindled a fire and the pleasant odor of wood smoke drifted up the hillside to the bear where he lay in a clump of pine trees. A more delightful smell followed. Never had anything so alluring come to Arctos' nostrils. It was better than fresh fish, ripened huckleberries, bitter ants, or even sweet sugary honey. It was the aroma of frying bacon. Coffee began to boil and Arctos wanted to go right down there.

He had no fear of the thousands of woolly sheep, nor of the half dozen noisome dogs. He would face them any time—but not the two-legged animals. Fear of the man-smell was instinctive and stronger in the bear than his huge appetite or curiosity.

Then another smell came, so enticing that Arctos almost forgot to be afraid of anything. It was sweet, like a bee tree. Carlo had put a pot of dried apricots on to stew and Arctos could hardly restrain himself. He shuffled around and around under the pine trees in pure ecstasy, rolled over and over on the grass, scratched joyfully on the bark of an aspen tree, stood erect to sniff the fragrance, sat down on his haunches again and licked his chops with lolling red tongue.

Arctos came from a long line of clever, very wise black bears. His ancestors had to be both clever and wise to live. Just as he was about to strike boldly out in plain sight of the camp the age-old inherited wisdom came to his rescue and sent him scuttling back into the forest.



THERE was something peculiar about color in Arctos' family. His father was glossy black, without an off-color hair in his whole hide. Mother bear was black, too, although she had a small white spot on her throat. Her first two cubs were as jet black as their parents. The next year she had three cubs, one darkish brown, one black with a white patch extending from its lower jaw clear back between its front legs across its chest, and the third a bright yellow. This was Arctos, and no Scotch collie dog ever paraded a more beautiful golden coat than his.

The freakish coloring saved his life the first time he ventured into the sheep camp. He came to the clump of pine trees before dawn, curiosity and appetite struggling mightily with wisdom as he watched the woolly horde scatter into the forest, followed by Carlo and the yammering dogs.

The shepherd had butchered one of the sheep, wrapped the meat in a white cloth and hung it in a tree behind the tent. The blood smell was more than Arctos could stand. He cast wisdom aside. When Car-

lo was a half mile away with his noisy charges the bear crept upwind to sniff the delightful odor at close range. He stole right up to the meat, took a bite and found it delicious, not at all like the heavy grease smell of the woolly beasts.

He went around the white tent and thrust his shaggy head through the opening. There stood a kettle full of stewed apricots, a sack of sugar and a slab of bacon in a box!

He was so busy tasting first one of these wonderful morsels, then another, he did not hear Carlo coming until the shepherd threw back the tent flap. Arctos lay in the middle of the things he had scattered, eating sticky raisins from a package he had torn open with teeth and claws.

He looked for a way to escape. The back and sides of the tent were staked down. He was cornered. Carlo had a rifle but he did not use it. He was too excited and confused to remember he even had it. Instead he yelled, "Get out!" as loud as he could.

The yellow bear rolled to his feet.

"Get out! Get out!" screeched the shepherd, stepped forward and planted a heavy boot in the bear's belly.

Arctos reared on his hind feet and struck Carlo with a vicious front paw Carlo kicked again and the bear knocked the man down, clawed at his chest and bit his shoulder. Then he saw the open tent flap and galloped toward the protecting forest.

Carlo scrambled to his feet, grabbed the rifle and shot seven times. Six times he missed. The seventh bullet plowed across Arctos' shoulder just as he reached the safety of the trees.

Arctos lay in a mud wallow with only eyes, ears and the point of his nose showing. He had sulked for five days in the cool healing mud. His wound healed but he grew ravenously hungry.

Slowly, painfully he crawled from the wallow into bright sunlight. A warm southwest wind soon caked the mud on his body and he was black instead of yellow. Many times during the summer he had wallowed in mud and let it dry on his coat to keep mosquitoes and flies from biting. The mud did not bother him now.

Stiffness and pain in his shoulder were minor irritations. Only one thing was uppermost in his mind. Food. Where could

he get something to eat? How could he fill his aching, empty stomach? Berries were not ripe. It was too late to fish, even if he could have caught fish with a stiff shoulder. He could not dig for roots or ground squirrels. He could not run fast enough on three legs to catch a fawn deer or elk. There were porcupines—but Arctos did not relish the thought of tackling one of the prickly animals.

He hobbled to the top of a grassy knoll and lay down to rest, sullen, desperate and dangerous. Below him were Carlo and the sheep. Carlo was sullen and dangerous, too, with white bandages almost hiding his arm and head. He carried his rifle and kept constant watch. Next time any animal came anywhere near his tent or sheep he would shoot to kill.



ANOTHER man came riding and the man-smell grew even more foreboding. Their voices drifted up to Arctos and his small beady eyes grew red with a new feeling—hate. Blood ran hotly in his veins and made the hurt shoulder throb cruelly. It would have made little difference then if he had known what the men said to each other.

"You hurt, Carlo! What happened?"

"A great yellow dog get in my tent. He eat my dried grape. I kick him. He bite and scratch. I shoot. I do not kill!"

"Dog? Eat raisins? Bite and scratch? Dogs don't scratch. Musta been a bear."

"No bear. You say bear is black. This dog was yellow. Big yellow."

"I forgot t' tell you. Once in a coon's age a yellor bear does show up. Next time you see a big boogie in y'r camp, shoot it, black or yellor!"

Arctos watched for a long time. Carlo, the other man and the dogs went toward camp. Arctos stole noiselessly, belly close to the ground, head low, toward the nearest sheep which lay in the shade of a spruce tree. His eyes glittered and his jaws drooled as he wiggled near. With a quick three-legged dash he was on the woollies, grabbed one by the neck in his powerful jaws and lay down to tear away the smelly wool and feast on hot, savory mutton.

Two days later Arctos killed another sheep. He kept right on killing them un-

til berries were ripe. Once Carlo saw a dingy-looking black bear that walked with a limp and fired a shot at it. The bear loped away, but came back that night to kill yet another sheep and feast on his kill.

Carlo and the campender were furious. "That bear 'll kill every sheep we got," said the campender.

"Two bears," said Carlos. "One black, one yellow. I shoot better next time."

By that time, however, it was August and Arctos sniffed a breeze laden with the irresistible fragrance of ripe huckleberries. Elderberries were ripe, too, and the bear broke down the bushes to feast on them. Arctos ate greedily and waxed fat. His wound was entirely healed, but it left a bad scar across his shoulder and he walked stiffly.

September snow settled down on the mountains softly as summer dew. It melted almost at once and the sun shone again, but nights were cold. Berries were all gone. Ground squirrels and marmots went into their holes deep in the ground, even before fall weather came.

Arctos sometimes worked several hours to dig one ground squirrel out of its den and then but had a mouthful for all his labor. The ground froze and even this scanty food supply was cut off. The situation was critical. Arctos went back to the fouled sheep ranges. The woolly hordes were gone. All he had to eat was an occasional mouse, chipmunk or pine squirrel.

More snow came and the bear wandered deeper into the mountain fastnesses. One day he heard rifle shots, some far away, others near. Fear of the man-smell, fear of the thunderous noise that came from man's rifles, fear of the cruel searing hurt inflicted by man drove even the pangs of hunger from his mind.

He kept the dense growths of ceanothus, laurel, young pine trees and willows. He did not travel far in the days that followed. He was afraid to make trails that the dread man-beast might see.

One day the fresh blood smell was in the air. It made the bear more hungry than ever, but he dared not hurry to it. He waited until there were no more rifle shots, no more man-smell before sniffing his way to where an elk had been killed. The hunters had left most of the meat and Arctos feasted for several days.

Snow piled deeper. Winter was here. He traveled again, this time with head down, in a straight line to a deep canyon with dark forested slopes. He was sleepy and he knew a good place to hibernate, under a giant white fir tree that had fallen to the ground.

He dug out a den just large enough to permit him to crawl inside and lie down comfortably. Then he pulled brush into the entrance to seal it, closed his eyes and fell asleep. Snow came softly down, and more snow, until the mountains wore a coat of it four, five and six feet deep. Wind came out of the north. It was ten below zero, twenty below, fifty below. The yellow bear slept, cozy and warm.



ARCTOS was awakened by water trickling down through brush and debris over his den. He knew spring had come and pulled away the brush to crawl out. The south slopes were green with new grass and warm southwest winds melted snow on the north slopes and filled creeks with icy water.

The pretty yellow hair on one side of Arctos' body was matted. There was a rubbed spot on one hip where he had lain against a stone. He had slept in one position for five months and his body was stiff from lack of exercise. His tender feet soon were cut and scratched so that he left a bloody trail on the rough ground. His bad shoulder ached and he limped when he walked.

On a warm south slope he tore apart an old rotten log to get a few white grubs. They did little to allay his gnawing hunger. In a swamp he pulled up grass and ate the roots. All the generous layers of summer fat from hearty meals of fish, mutton, berries and elk meat were gone. He grew weak and gaunt. His once beautiful hair loosened and dropped out. The nights were chilly and he had no way to keep warm except to keep moving.

Slowly, a few miles a day, he made his way toward the sheep ranges. At a small stream he stopped to fish. He loved to stand in the middle of the creek and cuff trout out on the bank as they made their way upstream, heavy with spawn. He ate his fill of the delicious things and ambled

on with some of his old happy nature restored.

For a few weeks fish were easy to catch. Then that food supply faded. June came and sheep were on their way to the mountains again. The bear traveled that way.

In a level stretch of pine forest Arctos caught a faint odor of freshly killed meat and changed his course straight upwind toward it. Often a mountain lion killed a deer and ate only part of it. Arctos had shared many such feasts.

After awhile another odor came downwind, sweet and fragrant as honey. Arctos shuffled down the slopes, puffed eagerly on the upgrades. There was easy food ahead and he hungered for red meat after eating fish for so long. He craved sweets, too.

The smells grew stronger as he crossed a small ridge. Now a third one was added, the pungent odor of freshly splintered pine wood, like that when a tree is twisted in two by the wind.

Arctos was in bear heaven when he reached the top of the next hill. He sat down on his haunches, raised his nose and took a full measure of delight in sniffing the air. Then ambled slowly forward, all his senses whetted to their keenest edge. He came to a small, three-sided pen made of freshly chopped pine logs.

In a far corner opposite the opening lay a good sized chunk of elk meat. Above it were the sweets, a liberal sprinkling of dried apples. Hunger drove Arctos forward, curiosity bade him investigate this queer structure, wisdom ordered him to turn tail and run away as fast as he could.

He circled the pen at some distance, stopped and shuffled around it the other way, a little closer this time. Then he caught the man-smell, very faint, but it stopped him in his tracks. The smell of dried apples was almost irresistible. The fragrance of red meat pulled at the muscles of his stomach and his lips were moist with saliva. He opened his mouth and started for the pen.

A log lay across the entrance. He must step over it to reach the tempting food. He put his nose across and the the man-smell was stronger. He backed away, went behind the pen and tried to reach the food through the cracks. A small bite of apple was all he could get. It tasted even better than it smelled. Now nothing could

keep him from going back to the entrance.

He put one paw tentatively across the log, withdrew it and put the other over. He pulled it back and looked all around, rubbed his itching shoulder against a corner of the pen and turned again to the bait. His keen eyes caught the outline of an iron chain in the pine needles of the floor. Carefully he reached over to cuff at the thing with long, extended claws. It clinked, a sharp wicked sound like the bolt of Carlo's rifle.

Arctos loped away as fast as he could, stark terror lending speed to his crippled gait. He would have been even more terrified had he known of the gaping toothed jaws of the steel trap which lay just across that log in the entrance to the pen, waiting for him to put a foot between them, waiting to close in a cruel grip that would never let go.

The next day Arctos heard the terrible deep-voiced bay of fox hounds. He was not afraid of a dozen silly yapping sheep dogs. He could slap those slow-moving work creatures right and left, but this menace was quite different. Arctos needed no experience to tell the purpose behind those loud-crying hounds that tracked their prey by scent and never quit a trail.

Bear wisdom was enough. He ran into a swamp where the dogs could not follow, then across a ridge to a creek where he waded for a mile and crossed to another swamp. He felt safe there until dogs and rifleman left the mountains. The damage Arctos had done to the woolly flocks the previous summer had made him a hunted thing with a price on his head.

Again he lumbered through the forest with the smell of sheep camps pulling him toward them. When the breeze was right he could pick up the wool-grease odor five, ten and even twenty miles away. He wanted more of the savoury, easy meat under those woolly hides.

Early one morning he ambled down to a level stretch of meadow beside a small creek and found several fine large anthills. He squatted beside one of them and drew a front paw across the top of it. The small insects scurried for safety and Arctos licked them up with a long red tongue. There was little substance to ants, but they satisfied a craving for bitter things to eat.

Another bear came out of the woods and

stopped by the biggest anthill. Arctos withdrew to the edge of the forest and watched her lick up the tasty morsels. She was a beautiful black bear, a little smaller than Arctos, with a sleek shining coat.

Arctos turned to go away, to seek another place to forage, turned for another look at the black bear and caught a tantalizing new odor, one that made blood race through his veins. Slowly he went toward her, his yellow coat glistening in the sunlight. She looked up and waited. Arctos walked up to her. They rubbed noses. He had found his mate.

He swung around and started at a trot upwind toward the strong sheep smell. The black bear stayed where she was. Arctos went back to her, rubbed her nose again. This time it was she who led the way to the top of a little knoll. She lifted her sleek head a little, swaying from side to side as if to catch an odor from far away. Arctos' shaggy head swayed too.

A shifting breeze brought the smell of high snow-capped mountains, of sun on pine needles, of chill tingling water cascading down granite cliffs. No traps, dogs and rifles, no sheep were in those distant mountains. It was the smell of freedom. The black bear sniffed again, turned to Arctos, and together they traveled that way.



IT WAS mid-summer when Carlo and his sheep worked their way into the mountainous retreat of the bears. Carlo came with his rifle, intent on destroying every bear that he saw. By now the story of a yellow bear fighting a shepherd had gone the length and breadth of the sheep ranges.

Carlo enjoyed the prominence he had attained. He was even proud of the claw marks on his face. Carlo knew all about bears now and answered all questions about them with authority.

He took his sheep far beyond the dead-line of the sheep range, into the primitive area held for wild animals alone. In this rugged land deer, elk, moose, bears and all the smaller beasts were not to be molested by man, herds of sheep, rifles or dogs. It was sanctuary for them.

Carlo sought to fatten the woolies on

the luxuriant forage that grew in this wild animal paradise, and Carlo was looking for Arctos. When the yellow bear didn't show up on the old sheep ranges, Carlo drifted the sheep farther in to try to kill the bear, to get revenge, to further the legend of himself as a great bear fighter.

Arctos saw the woolly hordes pour through a pass between two towering peaks. He had heard their discordant babble for a whole day, sniffed the greasy wool for two days more. He watched the men unpack the horses, put up the white tent, build a fire and cook.

The odor of frying bacon, stewing dried fruit, warming beans, boiling coffee drifted down breeze to the bear's sensitive nose. He reveled in their fragrance. Later in the evening the men killed a mutton and hung the meat in a tree near the tent. All Arctos' longing for fresh red meat came back.

Arctos' mate found the strange smells as enticing as he did, but she had a more cautious nature and she feared the powerful man-smell.

She had strong desires, too, and a black bear's full measure of curiosity—but before long there would be the serious business of looking for a suitable den to winter in, to give birth to the cubs.

First though she must have a little closer look at the shepherd's camp, a little time to linger near those heady odors, a measure of gratification for the insatiable curiosity of a black bear. She wandered out of the shelter of the forest into a small meadow to be more directly downwind from camp.

Carlo shot true this time. The black bear fell. Arctos heard her, heard the loud bellow of pain, saw her struggle, then lie still. He went back into the forest at a slow shambling trot.

Before morning he was back, killed a sheep and ate heartily of it.

Carlo swore mightily. "I get one bear! I will get all bears!"

He put out enticing treats. On a fallen tree he laid some dried apples and sat all night with his rifle to watch. He butchered a sheep, hung it some distance from camp and expected the bears to come to it. One bear did come and was promptly shot.

It was a day of great excitement when Carlo saw the yellow bear near his camp. It had been raining and Arctos' coat of fur

was washed until it shone. No trace of mud from the wallows was left. He was a beauty. The sheepherder was sure that he could kill the yellow bear too. That would make him the hero of the sheep country.



CARLO'S conscience bothered him not at all, either for desecrating a game sanctuary by stealing all the forage or killing the animals in it. He shot four more bears that were guiltless of any wrong-doing. It was Arctos who came at night to kill and feast on fattening muttons.

Arctos watched from the rim of a rock bound coulee while Carlo set his most clever trap. He built a platform of poles in the top of a pine tree overlooking the camp and sheep bedgrounds, where he could lie and wait all night long with his rifle ready.

It was bright moonlight and Carlo knew he could shoot straight enough at short distance to hit the big bear. Arctos was not far away when Carlo left his tent and climbed into his lookout. The bear very carefully kept out of rifle range that night. Next day he killed a sheep while Carlo slept.

The sheep bedding grounds were on a rocky point that jutted out from a patch of scrubby pine, spruce and white fir. In only a few days every vestige of plant life was trampled out in this area. It was a blackened, barren spot in the colorful meadow. Each day the spot grew larger as the sharp-hoofed animals radiated back and forth to fresh feeding grounds.

In a week ten acres were despoiled, in two weeks forty acres. Before fall came all the basin would be ruined for use by wild animals. The sheep would be taken to ranches where there was a plentiful supply of forage, but the wild things must do with what was left.

Carlo put out his tempting baits of dried fruit, bacon, sugar, and as a surprise inducement, a can of honey. The air around the lookout trap was redolent with heavy sweetness. A bear could have smelled the place for thirty miles if the wind was right. Arctos was right in the midst of it.

The sheepherder was getting supper and cooking odors mingled with those of the

sweets. Arctos' whole body tingled as he moved closer. He saw the sheepherder just a moment after Carlo had spotted the blotch of yellow that was Arctos.

The bear went to the ground at the impact of the bullet. He roared with pain as he rolled to his feet. Carlo's hand had trembled with excitement as he pulled the trigger. The bullet had missed a vital spot.

Arctos bellowed as he charged—not the sheepherder, but the band of bedded sheep. He waded through the frantically stampeding creatures, knocking them right and left. In the cloud of dust that powdered up Carlo emptied his rifle, hoping for another hit. The dogs added their yapping to the din of thousands of trampling hoofs, bleating ewes and the frantic crying of lambs.

A woolly, smelly tidal wave rolled off the bedgrounds, in the very middle of it a pain-maddened bear wreaking vengeance on the greedy beasts that had caused all his trouble. Carlo went down beneath the wave, knocked off his feet and tromped by hundreds of sharp hoofs.

The great bear stopped when he came to the prostrate man. Carlo started to get up. Arctos slapped him flat and stood over him with jaws open, hot breath in his face.

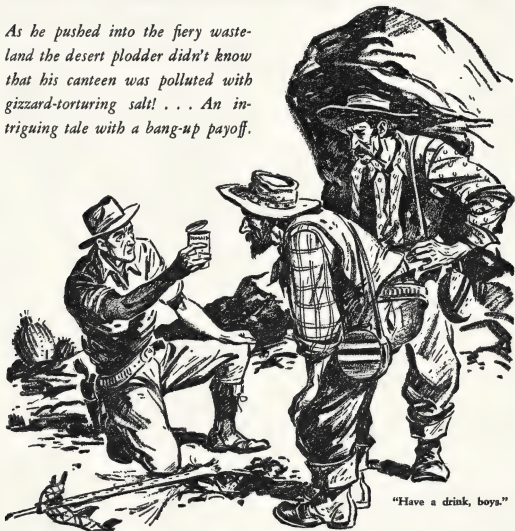
Somewhere, sometime, someone had told Carlo that if a man played dead a bear would not finish him off. It took all the self-control he had now to play dead while the great yellow bear put a hairy paw full in his face and rolled his head back and forth on the ground. It seemed hours before the bear left him and shuffled into the forest again.

Carlo no longer wanted to be a hero, a famous bear killer. He did not even want to be a sheepherder any longer. He wanted only the peace and quiet of Gascony—where there were no bears.

Next day Arctos listened from his mud and wallow to the bleating of sheep grow fainter and fainter as they were driven through the pass and out of game sanctuary. Berries were ripe in the lower stretches of the mountains and as the rancid odor of wool grease faded Arctos thought he could smell them. He would go that way as soon as his wound healed.

When Fighting Blood Runs Out

As he pushed into the fiery wasteland the desert plodder didn't know that his canteen was polluted with gizzard-torturing salt! . . . An intriguing tale with a bang-up payoff.



By ELI COLTER

THE stage came to a jolting stop in Coyote Wells, and the sole passenger crawled out of the coach and looked back the way they had come. For twenty miles he could trace the course of the winding desert road by the dust cloud so white with alkali as to look like smoke. He brought his gaze back to Coyote Wells: one store, one saloon, eleven cabins, four of them empty. He looked at the driver and grinned ruefully:

"Call this a town?"

The lank driver eyed his late passenger with the fleeting gaze reserved for a tenderfoot. "Only one for a hundred mile, stranger." He glanced at the storekeeper who had appeared in the doorway. "No mail, Larry." He released the brake, and the stage rumbled away.

The passenger stepped onto the porch of the store and looked at the thermometer hanging on the wall by the door. The tem-

perature was a hundred and twenty-two degrees in the shade. He pulled open the mosquito-netting door and stepped into the store.

The storekeeper greeted him sociably. "Come right in, friend. Sit down and have a drink of water."

The water was hard with alkali and luke warm, but it was wet. The stranger drank it gratefully, sat down on the nearby chair, pushed his new white Stetson back on his dark head and mopped the sweat from his face with a clean white handkerchief. "I'm Stephen Douglas. Heard there was gold in this neck of the woods. Thought I'd come up and try my luck."

The storekeeper said, "Hmmm. I'm Larry Petross. Everybody just calls me Larry." He turned his head to look at a lean medium-sized man who suddenly appeared at the doorway and came in. "Was there somethin' for you, Mark?"

The lean man shook his head, walked over to the counter and propped himself against it, and eyed Stephen. He looked the mining man as fully as Stephen looked the tenderfoot. His thin hawk face was a dehydrated map of the desert. "Not a thing, Larry. I just thought I'd come over and welcome the stranger in our midst."

Stephen thought: "This is the man, on the watch for me." But for an instant he didn't turn his gaze on the thin man, he didn't want to look at him till he could be sure of hiding his desire to kill him on sight.

The thin man addressed Stephen: "Heard you say your name is Douglas. I'm Mark Freye. If you're up here to prospect around, I might put you in the way of something."

Stephen looked at him then. Yes, this would be the man, on the alert like a cat watching a rat hole. "How do you do, Freye. Pleased to meet you. About the first thing I want to find is a partner who knows his way around this blistering country."

"Then Mark's your man," Larry Petross put in. "Mark made a nice little strike not long ago. Rich ore, too. Nigh as good as what Algerian Gamaliel Breyfogle brung in."

"If not better," said Freye. "I've been planning on going out again. Been layin' around living off that last chunk, it's

about gone. Was just wishing somebody'd come along to keep me company. How soon you want to go, Douglas?"

"Oh, today, tomorrow, any time. I came to look for a mine. No use sitting around town."

Freye approved briskly. "Right. We'll hit out soon's it cools off a little this evenin'. I'll have the jacks loaded come dusk." He straightened from the counter. "Well, guess I'll go back and get another glass of beer. Drop over and have a drink with me, Douglas."

"Thanks. I don't drink. I'll just sit and rest a while in a seat that doesn't rock and bounce, Freye."

Freye laughed and went on out.

Larry Petross drew closer to Stephen. "You headin' for the Amargosa Wash? Lots of fellas go up there to look for the old Algerian Gamaliel Breyfogle mine."

"I'm looking for gold, Petross. I don't care where I find it. That's a cumbersome name to use every time you mention a man, isn't it?"

Petross grinned. "I'll say. But that was the way he used it. He used to say it was his trademark. Had it writ on everything he owned. Wonder he didn't slap it on his mules. Most fellas think it's too hot this time of year to tackle the Wash. It's dangerous country. Lots of men don't come back from there. Some's found, some ain't. They just don't come back."

"I heard there was a young kid who went out there in the last few months and didn't come back."



PETROSS nodded. "Yep. That's right. Dan Fletcher. He was a tenderfoot. Didn't know the old scorcher. He was found, though. Couple of months afterward. He's buried over to the graveyard, by Algerian Gamaliel Breyfogle. You've heard of the Breyfogle mine, ain't you?"

"Only chance remarks. I never heard the whole story."

"Ain't much to it. He found a rich claim out in the big Wash. He hollered out a hole about five feet deep, took out some ore, and the rock was so hard he had to come in for drills and powder. Didn't want nobody else grabbin' his mine, so he filled the hole up again and set a big red lava

rock on top of it. Put his singlejack under the rock so he'd know the right one again."

"And then never could find the rock. Yes, I've heard that part of it." Stephen rose from the chair, and picked up the suitcase he had set on the floor beside him. "The poor devil probably turned over every red rock in the Amargosa looking for it."

"I reckon," agreed Petross. "Died tryin'. Like a lot of others since then."

"Young Dan Fletcher, for instance?"

"Yep, that's what he was huntin' for, Douglas. I think a sand storm covered that rock. I don't think any man'll ever find it. Mark Freye couldn't, and he knows that Wash well as airy man can know it."

Stephen shifted his suitcase in his hand. "Any place around here where I can rest for a while before I start out?"

"Sure! I own all these cabins here, built most of 'em. Just take your pick, open the door and walk in. You're welcome. How about signin' the register? I like to keep track of the visitors we get in Coyote Wells."

"Certainly. Glad to." Stephen thrust his hand into his pocket and took out three silver dollars. "I'll pay for the cabin."

Petross took the silver eagerly. "Say now, that's right handsome of you. Register's over here." He led the way to the counter and flopped open a big dusty ledger.

Stephen picked up the pencil tied to the ledger. The left-hand page was scrawled full of names. In the center of the page was the name *Algerian Gamaliel Breyfogle*. It was written in a round upright hand, the tail of each final letter drawn back to form an underscore. The right-hand page was barely full. The last entry was *Daniel D. Fletcher*. Stephen wrote beneath it, *Stephen Douglas, Santa Barbara, Calif.* The town after Fletcher's name was Bakersfield. Stephen laid down the pencil, picked up his suitcase again.

Petross followed him to the door. "You can take the Breyfogle cabin, if you want. Third from the end. Most fellas don't want it. Think it's unlucky."

Stephen said thanks, and went along the hard-packed clay and sand that passed for a street. A hundred yards beyond, he could see the graveyard. It was surrounded by an iron-rod fence eight feet high, with a grilled iron gate. The fence was red with rust and the gate hung open.

Petross yelled after him: "The fence is to keep the coyotes out. . . ."

Stephen stopped by the third cabin from the end, opened the plank door and went in. There were no windows, only holes in the walls edged by ragged tatters of dirty mosquito netting. A pole bunk was attached to one wall, fitted with a straw tick and one dusty blanket. Stephen walked over to the head of the bunk and set his suitcase on the bed. Across the head of the blanket was written in thinned black paint, *Algerian Gamaliel Breyfogle*.

Stephen turned away from the bunk, went outside again and headed for the graveyard. The open gate was so rusted and eroded that a man would have had to break it from its hinges to push it shut. The graves were covered with rock cairns two to three feet in height, stones of all colors that achieved a kind of pied monotony.

Two graves were enclosed by an iron picket fence, the gate long rusted shut. One was decorated by an ancient petrified log. Another had a roof over it, half the shingles blown off, the steep-pitched joists and rafters still sound.

The five graves at the end bore headboards. The next to the last had an old bottle, baked deep purple by the desert sun, leaning against the headboard, dead dried flower stems in the bottle. Only faint traces of the painted name remained, but the painted wood itself stood out fully a quarter of an inch in relief, the rest of the board surface scoured down by the driving sharp sand. The name was clearly legible, *Algerian Gamaliel Breyfogle*.

The words painted on the next board were still black and unmarred. The name, *Daniel D. Fletcher*.

Stephen's mind echoed fragments of Petross' remarks, as he stood there gazing at the last headboard. "I think a sand storm covered that rock—Mark Freye couldn't find it—Mark knows the Amargosa well as airy man can know it—"

Stephen muttered aloud: "It took a tenderfoot to find it, eh, Mark? So you killed him, and claimed the find. But you didn't tell what kind of find it was. Well, we'll see."

He turned away, his gaze lingering on Daniel Fletcher's grave.

"Well, we'll see. . . ."

THEY started on the long trek after sundown, the loaded burros plodding ahead of them. Freye said: "We'll need plenty of extra water." They had two canteens and two five gallon cans full. "And salt. I like plenty of salt. Valuable in the desert. Sun fries it out of you. Priceless stuff, sometimes. I knowed a fella once that traded a million dollars for a handful of salt."

Stephen made no answer. His gaze was on the desert ahead. In the moonlight, the wide wastes of hard-baked salt flats and the alkali-caked arroyos lost their blinding glitter and lay neutral quiet gray under the stars. Mourning coyotes in the hills kept them company, as they threaded their way between mesquite and knee-high barrel cacti and creosote bush and cholla.

They traveled all night, and stopped at daylight by a spring. Freye stretched their tarpaulin on stakes he had brought, and they lay down in the shade of it to sleep and wait for sundown. They continued that order of travel, but even at night the mercury hung around a hundred degrees Fahrenheit and the sand was hot underfoot.

Freye had grown soft, sitting around the Wells, eating too much and drinking more, gambling with anyone who would take him on, gossiping with Larry Petross and sleeping too much. He was feeling the strain, but he didn't mention it. He thought Stephen stood up uncommon well for a tenderfoot.

They descended the barren rocky hills into the monstrous wash nearing sun-up one morning. The bed of the wash was seamed with dry watercourses, with depressions separated from one another by low ridges of sun-blackened rock. Between most of the ridges sand heaped in drifts and dunes, sand covered a third of the ridges. Stephen looked around at the blasted scene of desolation.

"How far to the nearest water, Freye?"

"Twenty mile or so." Freye looked over from rigging the tarpaulin on mesquite trees from which he had lopped the limbs. "Far enough to fry the guts out of you if you tried it in this sun without plenty in your canteen."

For three days they examined the terrain around. Veins of white quartz showed frequently, cutting through the volcanic

country rock, but it was barren quartz. Freye said once: "We ought to find something in this section. Over yonder—" he pointed to the crest of a blue-hazed hill more than fifteen miles away—"some fellows are running a bore, around four hundred feet deep by now. Blue Wildcat Mine. Chuck Warren located it. Nice fella. 'Bout your size, brown hair and beard all over his face, hair down to his neck. I'd like to locate something as good as Chuck Warren's Blue Wildcat."

On the morning of their fourth day in the camp, Freye slumped down in the shade of the tarpaulin at sunset, grumbling. "Hell, we're wasting our time. But I kind of wanted to look here. It's where I found that last batch of ore, over yonder. Come along, I'll show you." He got up and started toward a ridge a little to the north of the camp. Stephen followed him to the ridge, and there Freye stopped, and pointed.

Here a heavy outcropping of quartz showed plainly enough where someone had dug a hole. On either side of the outcrop, two large clumps of desert holly grew six feet high, its frosty-white leaves sprawling from seven to eight feet around. The hole between the holly clumps had partly filled with drifting sand.

Stephen went down on one knee and scrutinized the walls of the shallow hole. He pried with his pick as specimens embedded in the walls, and looked innocently up at Freye. "That's gold, isn't it, Freye?"

Freye gave it a mere glance. "Sure. I knowed there was a little left. But you got to have powder and drills to get that stuff out. It's hard as the hinges of hell. I dulled my pick and a whole set of hand drills, and used up the last of my powder. In the morning, we can look-see if there's enough to bother with. We can always go back for powder and drills."

Stephen followed him to the camp, thinking that was what Algerian Gamaliel Breyfogle had gone back for, powder and drills. Thinking, "If you knew this was here all the time, why didn't you mention it before? Why didn't you bring powder and drills in the first place?"

But he kept his thoughts to himself. They went into the shelter, and Freye threw himself down in the hot shade. Stephen went over to the entrance posts where the canteens hung, his own, unmarked, on the left-

hand post: Freye's, with the letters M F painted on the face, on the right-hand post. Stephen took down his own canteen, swallowed a mouthful of water, screwed the cap on and returned the canteen to its place on the left-hand post.



HE WENT to sleep that night thinking about powder and drills. In the morning, they examined the hole between the holly bushes again, and Freye said on second thought it might have enough in it worth the effort. They might as well take a washy back to Coyote Wells for the powder and drills.

As they left the ridge to return to the camp, Stephen eyed the red rocks he had located, seven of them. Six varying smaller ones, and one large one roughly pyramidal and pitted as a worm-eaten board. The big one was on the ridge by the holly bushes. He followed Freye to the shelter, took a sip of water, and sat down in the already sweltering shade.

Freye said briskly: "Well, since we've decided what we're goin' to do, no use wastin' time. We got to have water, anyway. All we got left is in the canteens, neither of 'em more than a quarter full. You get the stuff together, while I go round up the burros."

He went out of the shelter, and swung off toward the south where the hobbled burros had been grazing in the mesquite. Stephen gazed after him, eyes narrowed against the sun glare. He was, he told himself, interested in the whole process, the way Freye was ordering procedure. If he knew that deposit was there all the time, he knew whether it was worth digging for. Why wait till this morning to discover it and suddenly decide to hit right for town?

Well, for one thing, hanging around for several days ran the water supply out. And starting now, they'd have to travel in the

full heat of the sun. But a tenderfoot shouldn't be noticing such things as that. A tenderfoot wouldn't.

Before Stephen finished packing their outfit, Freye was back scowling and grumbling. "The damn jacks are gone, Douglas. Chewed the ropes off. We'll have to leave the stuff here and hit out light." A tenderfoot might believe that, too.

Stephen didn't say anything. He went on with his job, packing the stuff neatly, getting it ready to bury in the sand. Freye stood around, frowning, and said suddenly:

"Tell you what. We might have a last look for the damn jacks. You go north. Keep on their tracks, if you find 'em. Don't go more'n a mile or so. If they seem to be traveling, let it slide and come back. They're headed for water. I'll take a look in the opposite direction."

Stephen agreed, casually enough, and started off to the north, but he wondered just what Freye was up to now. Freye watched till Stephen disappeared among boulders and ridges.

But Freye didn't leave the shelter. He went over to the salt sack. He took from it a handful of salt. He walked over to the entrance poles, and poured the salt into the unlettered canteen hanging on the left-hand pole. He screwed the cap back, sloshed the water around to dissolve the salt, then lounged on the ground again waiting for Stephen to return.

When Stephen stepped into the shelter about an hour later, he removed his hat, wiped the streaming sweat from his face and eyed Freye curiously. "I couldn't see a sign of the burros anywhere. Not even tracks."

Freye said: "I couldn't either. I just got back. Well, let's bury the junk and git goin', eh?"

Stephen nodded. "You better bring in the pick from that ridge, so we can have all the tools here together."

Freye went for the pick. When he re-

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turned, he seemed to have recovered his good humor. "Well, looks like this trip's goin' to pay off, Douglas. You might's well get started for town. I'll have a last look for them damn jacks and catch up with you."

Stephen made no demur, took his canteen over his shoulder and started off. This was consistent, he thought. A tenderfoot would fall for that easily enough. "But," he muttered softly, "why did you pull the one about looking for the jacks and getting rid of me for a while? That one's got me, so far. I sure had plenty of reason for sending you to get the pick, fella."

Stephen plodded on in the broiling sun, taking it lightly and walking easy. He did not look back for Freye. He knew Freye would not be coming. Ahead of him through dancing heat waves he watched the blue-hazed hill where Chuck Warren and his helpers were driving the bore of the Blue Wildcat mine.



BEFORE he had gone two miles thirst was plaguing him, his mouth felt dry and his eyes began to smart. He made no move to drink from his canteen. The towering rocks, the sand, the air, threw the heat back at him. Sweat oozed from every pore and dried.

Stephen rested for an hour, got to his feet and went on. The sun was at its boiling best now. His thirst was growing. His mouth felt as if it were full of cotton, his lips were dry and beginning to swell. He carefully avoided wetting his lips with his tongue.

He kept his mouth closed and plodded. His smarting eyes were red-rimmed, squinted against the glare sun. Objects danced so violently in the heat waves, it was becoming a little hard to see. The sun lowered slowly till it seemed to balance on the jagged ridge of the mountains to the west, and the stray cirrus clouds in the brazen sky were turning copper and magenta, when he came to a dead yucca stalk sticking up in the sand. There was no plant at the stalk's base, and a red bandanna handkerchief was tied to the top of it, fluttering in the hot wind.

Stephen dropped wearily in the shade of a boulder. It was then he saw the two

men coming toward him. One was dark and wore a black mustache. Both were lean and fried by the sun. The second man had a brown beard and long brown hair curling to his neck. The bearded man hailed Stephen cheerfully:

"Hi there, pardner. Lost? Where you bound for?"

Stephen sat up. "No, I'm not lost. I'm supposed to be headed for Coyote Wells."

The bearded man came to a halt, and leaned against a boulder. "I'm afraid you *are* lost, then. You're goin' west. Coyote Wells is south."

The man with the black mustache spoke. "We're from the Blue Wildcat. I'm Hatch Dunkirk. This is Chuck Warren." He nodded toward the man with the brown beard.

"Glad to meet you. I'm Stephen Douglas. I wasn't headed for the Wells. I said I was *supposed* to be. I was backtracking." He nodded to the yucca stalk decorated by the red bandanna. "I'll show you something."

He got up and went over to the yucca stalk, pulled the stalk up and tossed it aside. He went down on one knee and dug in the sand. About a foot below the surface he came upon a thin slab of granite. He lifted the granite. Under it was a tomato can full of water.

"Have a drink, boys?"

Stephen lifted the can and wet his lips. "I buried this can while he was asleep. In the morning, after he'd gone on a few yards, I tied the bandanna to the yucca stick and caught up with him. That's Greek to you now, but I'll explain later." He drank a swallow of the warm water, rolling it around in his mouth before he swallowed it. "This can of water is proof that we came this way, swung far out of our course."

Dunkirk said mildly: "Well, you buried it there, or you wouldn't have known where to find it. I'd say you must have come this way, all right."

Stephen eyed him intently. "Look, if you wanted to lose a man in the desert, shift your course and send him west, when he would think he was going south, eh? In the full sun, with no water, or at least only a cupful that he'd drink up in the first mile or two, thinking he was coming to springs. Send him in a direction where he'd find no town for a hundred miles, straight into the blaze of Death Valley."

Warren frowned, and glanced at Dunkirk, then back at Stephen. "Murder by the sun."

Stephen unslung his canteen, poured a little water in it from the can, rinsed the canteen and poured the rinse water out. "Might cool it, a little." He poured the rest of the water from the can into the canteen and screwed the cap back. Then he looked at Warren. "You said it. Murder by the sun. And the sun don't tell. I wonder if you boys would go back with me to the place where I've been camped, just as witnesses to something?"

Warren answered with brisk alacrity. "Sure will. I'm curious. Let's go back to our camp, first, though, and fill our canteens and yours. We've got plenty of water."



THE three of them set off together up the Wash in the dusk. They stopped to rest and smoke at intervals, and the first light of dawn was breaking when they came in sight of the leanto. From the leanto, they turned directly south, following Freye's footprints here and there, up over the ridges and hills toward Coyote Wells. Beyond the hills the tracks were clearer in the sand, swerving now, like the trail of a man traveling hurriedly, erratic.

The sun was high and hot before they came upon the thing lying on the sand. It looked like a bundle of discarded clothes. But buzzards do not hover around discarded clothes.

Warren looked at the seven sailing black birds with their ragged wings, then he looked at Stephen. Four more black buzzards were perched on the figure on the sand. Warren said: "Is that what you're looking for?"

Stephen walked slowly toward it. "I'm afraid it is." The buzzards lifted and soared away. Stephen stopped, and glanced up at Warren. "Yes. That's him. Do you men know anything about a kid who was lost here on the desert a few months ago? Dan Fletcher."

An odd look flickered in Warren's eyes. "We know all about it. We met Fletcher. I mailed a letter for him in Coyote Wells. The only one he wrote after he came up here, he said."

Stephen stared down at the body. Freye

was lying on his back. Stephen put his hand into his coat pocket. "I can't see how this ever happened, Warren. He's been going in circles, like a man crazed by fright. Why, the fool shot himself!"

Dunkirk moved up to Stephen's elbow. "Yeah. He must have gone nuts. He was headed east. No water for thirty miles in that direction."

Stephen shook his head. "But he had plenty of water. I sent him to the ridge for the pick, and while he was gone I poured all the water from my canteen into his. I knew I had that canful in the sand, and another just like it farther on. I wanted him to last. I wanted to make him talk."

Warren pointed. "Well, he's talking. Or at least, that is." He walked over to where Freye's canteen lay. The cap was off, the water had poured into the sand. Around the spot where the water had sunk, and around the lip of the canteen, there was a line of white fine crystals. Warren wet his finger, touched it to the white rim, tasted it, and stared up at Stephen.

"Hell! Salt!"

Stephen's eyes widened. "So that's what he was doing when he sent me to look for the jacks! Pouring salt in my canteen."

Dunkirk said: "And you poured it back into his. When he found himself thirty miles from the springs with salt water in his canteen, he went nuts."

Stephen turned from the body on the sand. "Come on back to the camp. This isn't all I want you to witness. That's the way he got rid of Dan Fletcher, you know, the way he tried to get rid of me. He told me he once knew a man who'd traded a million dollars for a handful of salt. He didn't think I'd know what he meant. And I didn't—then."

Neither Warren nor Dunkirk asked any questions. Heedless of the sun, they returned to the camp in the Wash. They had plenty of water in their canteens. They took it easy. The sun was riding the hills when they reached the leanto. They didn't stop there. Stephen led them to the ridge where the hole had been dug between the holly bushes.

He pointed to the pyramidal red rock. "You might look under that, Warren."

Warren said: "My Lord, is that it?"

"It about has to be."

All three of them set their hands to the

task and heaved the big red rock aside. On the sand, where it had been, lay an old rusted singlejack. On the wooden handle three words had been burned with a hot iron: *Algerian Gamaliel Breyfogle*.

Stephen stood up, hefting the singlejack in his hand. "I'd have bet on his hiding the singlejack under the rock the way he'd found it. Safe keeping. Dan found it, you know. Here." He put his hand in his pocket again and took out a sweat-stained envelope. "Is that the letter you mailed for Dan?"



WARREN looked at it. It was addressed to Stephen Douglas Fletcher at Santa Barbara, California. The upper left-hand corner bore the return address of Daniel Derry Fletcher, Coyote Wells. Warren nodded. "That's it."

Stephen said: "I wanted Freye to think I was trying to be foxy and keep my identity a secret. I didn't give my last name." He took the envelope from the letter. "Here, read it."

Warren took the sheet of paper and Dunkirk moved up to read over his shoulder:

Dear Steve:

This is one on you, you old desert rat. Me, the rank tenderfoot, I blunder out into the big Wash and find the Breyfogle mine. Hit the trail. We're set for life.

I got me a partner after I located the mine. But I played smart. I never told anybody what I found, only him. You'll like him. He knows the desert almost as well as you do. That's why I took him on.

Close up shop in Santa Bab and land in Coyote Wells pronto. He's anxious to meet my big brother. Be seeing you.

Dan.

Stephen took the letter as Warren handed it back. "You see, I didn't even know Freye's name. The kid was so damned excited he forgot to mention it. I wrote back, but Dan was dead before my letter ever got here telling him to expect me in about six months. I learned of Dan's death on the way in. Freye, as Dan's partner, would get my letter, of course."

Dunkirk said: "And you knew, if he'd done for Dan, he'd be laying to do for you the same way. So you egged him on a bit by pretending to be a stranger."

Stephen smiled thinly. "Pretty sappy:

he'd know the Stephen Douglas from the return address. But I wanted to persuade him I was a very dumb tenderfoot, and he took me at my own valuation. You boys don't seem surprised at any of this."

Warren smiled. "Why should we? We knew who you were the minute we saw you. You look just like Dan. We were hunting for you. It must run in the family to have brains enough to look out for number one, Steve. I mean, buryin' a lifesaver in the sand."

Stephen stared. "You don't know how that sounds."

"It sounds like what I mean. Danny didn't trust Freye after they got started for the mine, didn't like the way Freye acted. He buried some cans of tomatoes. Dan did. They got him across the desert and back to the Blue Wildcat, after he found the salt water in his canteen."

Stephen said: "Men don't joke like that. If it was a joke, I'd kill you. Where is the kid?"

Warren laughed in delight. "Layin' low till he seen how you beat Freye to the draw. He's been layin' low up at the Wildcat, waitin' for you to come, Steve. He knew long as Freye thought he was dead, Freye'd make a play at you, and get what was comin' to him. We had a boy watchin' for you in Coyote Wells."

Dunkirk put in: "We thought it was about time for you to have reached the Wash, so we left the mine last night, heading up this way." He turned his head and shouted. "Come on outa cover, Dan. Freye's dead. Shot himself when he found salt water in his own canteen."

Another man stepped from behind a boulder. It was the other man with brown hair and beard who had been sitting under the Joshua tree a stone's throw behind Warren and Dunkirk. He grinned widely.

"Hello, Steve."

Stephen said: "My Lord, kid."

Dan's grin faded a little. "There was just one chance of a slip, Steve. That skeleton I'd traded clothes with was pretty old and dried out. But even Freye never thought of that; after all, the sun is damn hot."

Stephen said softly: "He got it wrong in the end too, kid. He traded a handful of salt for a million dollars."



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CHAPTER ONE

Trailside Slaughter

VANITY had sent Long John Poker over Miercoles Pass. Not wisdom. He knew, as did every *californio* who had ever ridden the Tuolumne highlands, that Miercoles was shunned even by the animals which had once tracked a game-trail through its notch. Highest of the Sierra crossings, it was a grim and treacherous place of soft slopes, eternal snow, and sudden avalanches. A detour north or south, however far, was a fair exchange for the chance of crushing death and merciless storm Miercoles offered.

But Poker, to whom horses meant much, had a new mount. A gift from the *Senora* Moreno, whose three wayward sons were again on her *rancherita*, chastened at

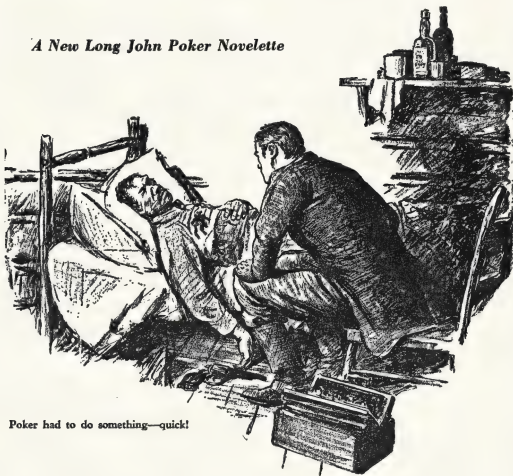
Poker's none too gentle hand and no longer interested in the high and reckless life of banditry offered in the company of the dread Murietta, across the divide. This was a good horse. Young, high-spirited and Sierra bred.

Legend had it that Juan Poker rode a winged cloud which but looked like a horse; a parcel of the tales told honestly by simple hill folk and repeated uneasily by bolder brethren on the plain. This was not so. Poker traveled like the wind. But he rode horses—the best he could get. And he had never owned a match for this Moreno pony.

Why not then give the animal the trial it deserved? Particularly when his work on the eastern slope was done and there was much violence yet to curb in the Mother Lode. Miercoles had been the answer to both urges, a swift passage and a fit trial for any man's horse.

By TOM W. BLACKBURN

A New Long John Poker Novelette



Poker had to do something—quick!

In the first rises of the pass, Poker's eyes had strayed ceaselessly to the sheer, insecure walls and his ears had been tuned for the heavy whisper which tells a listening man of rending earth and the downrush of a great mass from far above. But deep into the notch he had come onto something which drew his attention from the walls. It was the well-marked track of passing wagons. Not the kind of indelible mark ground into the lasting rock of safer crossings. No multitude had passed through Miercoles. But several wagons had—or one

wagon several times—when the track was generally known as impassable!

Long John's first thought was of the Lonnegran Party. Twenty wagons which had safely crossed the arid, merciless Humbolt, only to vanish into the Sierra, never to reappear on the far side. Twenty wagons, carrying the goods and hopes of an equal number of families, as completely gone as if they had dissolved. Long John's troubles lay with people who were already beyond the Sierra. He had heard of the Lonnegran string. But others had searched. Men who

knew their business. And they had returned empty-handed.

For a little while this vague tracery in the bottom of Miercoles notch raised a hope in Poker. Then it faded as the nature of the sign indicated single wagons most recently over this track, not a train. This indication crystallized a little late when the twisting of the pass straightened and he could see some distance ahead. A crude, two-wheeled *carreta* was jolting along the trail, drawn by a team of gaunt mules. A man rode the seat, driving. Two more were on saddle stock, flanking the rocking vehicle. And a fourth man rode in the slab-side box. Poker pulled his own mount up, ducking to one side instinctively. And he watched the procession ahead.

All four of the men, notwithstanding the *carreta*, were Yankee. Only one of them troubled him—the man in the box. The fellow's movements at balance against the jolting were peculiar. Finally it dawned on him. The man was bound—a prisoner.

Presently Miercoles made another twisting turn and the *carreta* lumbered from sight. Poker eased his mount from the shadows into which he had ducked and pressed on. *Carretas* belonged on the western slope. And no Yankee had a business in these high hills urgent enough to make him drive a prisoner-laden cart through Miercoles.

Through a pair of hours Poker played a watchful game of hide and seek with the cart ahead. It held on at a steady pace. If any of the men in the party were afraid of the threatening, water-dripping walls of the pass, they gave no sign. It seemed almost as though they knew the track well and travelled it with the contempt of familiarity. He fell to wondering if this single *carreta* had made enough trips up this forgotten and shunned trail to leave the marks he had first noted. It was, he decided, at least possible.

Another thing troubled him. The grade was steep, even for as flimsy a cart as that ahead. Yet the party was making good time. The crack of the driver's whip carried often back to Poker. Mules were scarce and dear in the Sierra. A man did not drive a team hard without good reason.

In mid-afternoon Poker's curiosity was a constant prodding and he decided to pull up on the party to ease it. He let out his

Moreno pony. The animal raised its pace eagerly, held it for a pair of minutes, then suddenly slacked. Poker growled and cocked his heels to use a little steel against this sudden lagging. He had no use for temperament in a horse on whose dependability his life might more than once depend. But it was not temperament which had stopped the animal. Before his spurs touched, Poker heard the sound.

It was the thing he had been unconsciously dreading from the instant he had breached the first gap of Miercoles. The shunned notch was earning its reputation again. Perhaps it was an under-seepage of water from some upper field of snow. Or a fault in the strata of the rock-ribbed walls. Perhaps it was the jolting of the *carreta*. Or even the increased tempo of his own pony's pace. A man couldn't tell.

High above, and but a little distance up the notch, a bulging overhang slipped down like sirup boiling over the lip of a pot. It fell slowly and the noise of its fall grew gently. A fine spray of rocks and lesser boulders streamed out from the greater mass. These struck first, around a slight bend ahead of Poker. He reined the Moreno pony into the middle of the trail in case a closer wall should also slide, and watched.



IT WASN'T until the overhang hit the floor of the pass with a sodden jolt which staggered his pony and filled the air with a screen of debris and dust, that he thought of the *carreta*. It had not been far ahead of him. The pony didn't want to move into the dusty screen hanging ahead. But Poker prodded the animal forward. Dust stung his nostrils. The queer smell of powdered rock was in the air. A trickle of rubble still bounded down the sere slope to spatter against the mass of the fallen slide.

For a long moment he didn't see the *carreta*. Then he caught sight of it on the far edge of the slide. Both of the mules were down. The two horsemen who had been flanking the cart had vanished from sight. But its two occupants—driver and passenger—were still in it. Poker saw the driver move feebly as he put the pony against the heap of shard lying between himself and the cart.

The position of the *carreta* was just cause to ponder the luck of men. Had the vehicle rolled on but a pair of yards further, it would have been untouched. As it was, the mass of the slide had missed it; the damage being done by a hail of fist-sized rock which had fanned out from the main body. One of the mules was dead. The other thrashed feebly. Poker put a bullet into its head and swung down.

Thrusting his foot between wheel spokes to climb onto the cart, Poker's eyes fell on the wheels. They were no round, hand-shaped slabs, such as a *californio* shaped for such a rude cart. They were factory made of good Iowa hickory, and they ran on greased iron hubs. Poker was a saddle man. But he knew wheels from a Murphy wagon when he saw them. Salvaged, he guessed, from some abandoned emigrant white-top. And he wondered where.

Then the driver above groaned and he swung on up. The man had been hit twice. Once on the thigh and again somewhere along his back. He was in deep pain, conscious, but dulled and speechless. Poker glanced into the box. The passenger lay there, his head mangled by a flying rock. Long John saw his earlier guess had been right. The man was securely pinioned. A needless precaution, now.

There was a battered case on the floor of the box. Thinking of linen which might be stripped to bind splinting to the driver's shattered thigh, Poker hauled it open and sprung the catch. The bag gaped, exposing in neat array surgical instruments, medicants and bandages. The carefully complete gear a medico might carry with him on a long journey. Poker glanced again at the dead man, wondering if this gear had belonged to him. Then the driver groaned again, and Poker went to his work.

Lifting the man down, he spread him on the ground, his limbs straight and his agonized body as much at ease as possible. A mountain willow clump lay half buried in rubble. Poker cut shafts from this and laid them out beside him. He was hunched over the injured man, tapping the reservoir of his mind for such details as came readily to mind when something prodded him with hard suddenness between the shoulder blades. And a grinding voice barked a command.

"Forget it, Doc—and get up!"

Poker turned his head slowly. A bulky, spade-faced man with incredibly small eyes was hunkered down in his shadow, his gun jammed forward against Poker's back. Long John recognized the fellow as one of the two horsemen who had been flanking the *carreta* before the slide. He had apparently been able to dodge free. Long John's eyes flickered upward and marked the fellow's companion, a rod away with the two horses, a ready rifle across his thigh. Poker's gaze blinked back to the man squatting behind him.

"Doc?" he said softly. "No. My name is John Poker."

Across the Sierra men flinched or grew welcoming at the sound of that name. This man with the little eyes seemed not to hear it.

"I don't care if your name's Saint Peter!" he growled. "Don't lie to me. You're a medico. You were fixin' to patch up Buckeye, here. That's plain enough. Well, Buckeye don't need patchin'. Leave him be. That corp in back was a medico, too. But he's a dead duck, now. And Paso and me'll loose plenty hide if we don't get the boss a medico, quick. Get up!"

Poker's gaze touched the man on the ground. Already he had been eased by being straightened out. Splints and careful moving to a place where he could rest would give him an edge of fighting chance. Ignoring the man with the little eyes, he reached into the open kit before him for a roll of bandaging. The man with the little eyes shot one hand out, caught Poker's collar, and heaved upward on it. At the same time he swiped downward with his pistol-barrel, skidding Poker's hat off into the dust. It wasn't a hard blow. But it hurt. And a quick, wicked fire flamed in Poker.

He dug his heels in, twisted free, and dropped in a crouch, his hand swinging smoothly toward his belt. Then he stopped, straightened, and shrugged. To the man with the little eyes, it must have looked as though this tall medico lacked the sand to back his obvious anger. It was, in fact, a whiplash exercise of will on Poker's part. He was curious at this man's need for a medico, of his talk of a boss whom he plainly feared. And his earlier puzzlement as to why men travelled Miercoles Pass when there were easier roads through the Sierra.

"Doc, you're smarter'n that corp in the

box was!" said the man with the little eyes. "We got him down to Grass Valley, last night. Him and his wife holed up in their shack and he never come out till the roof was afire and Buckeye had got the woman between the eyes. But he come, all right! When Big Ceasar goes after somethin', he delivers! Hit saddle, Doc. And ride ahead. That's a slick-legged pony of yours. I ain't takin' a chance of you makin' a break afore we hit the Hole. You wouldn't be no use to Kragg with a hole in your back!"

Long John closed the dead medico's kit, lifted it to the cantle of his saddle, and lashed it in place. Behind him he heard the injured man, Buckeye, stir and whine at Big Ceasar.

"You could ride one horse double and give me a chance. The doc wouldn't take long to fix me so's I could go. You can't leave me layin' here, Ceasar!"

The big man grunted scornfully. Buckeye whined again.

"Even Kragg wouldn't leave a man to die like this—!"

"I ain't Kragg!" Big Ceasar snapped. "The Doc wouldn't take long to fix you, eh? Hell, I can do it faster than him!"

Buckeye's startled bleat was cut short by the clam of a gun. Poker wheeled to see Ceasar sheathing his smoking weapon with a crooked, untroubled grin on his face.

"Hit saddle, I said, Doc!"

CHAPTER TWO

A Bargain In Bullets

POKER rode on through the sheer notch of Miercoles, Big Ceasar and Paso behind him. Just over the summit on the first fall of the western slope, Ceasar rode up to point at what appeared little more than a shallow fissure in one of the huge, flanking escarpments. Poker skeptically changed his course.

The Moreno pony made hard going up a talus slope to the foot of the fissure. Then the black rock fell back, exposing a narrow, threading canyon, filled from wall to wall by a small, rushing stream. Poker glanced inquiringly at his guide. Ceasar nodded and Poker put the pony into the water.

As he rode, Long John's eyes studied the walls. They were scored here and there. Once he saw unmistakable pick-axe marks

where a shoulder had been shaved back. And the incredible realization dawned that men had taken wagons through this slot. His attention dropped automatically to the water. It was murky where it should have been clear. This murkiness and the marks of passing wagons or *carretas* prepared him in a small way for the little bowl which suddenly opened out ahead of him a half hour later.

Gouged from great peaks by ice in forgotten ages, the bowl was completely surrounded by impassable walls of dizzy height except where the slotted canyon debouched into it. A pair of guards blocked the way here. Beyond were a scattering of rude cabins. And beyond these, reaching to the foot of the far wall, was the scoring of a hydraulic pit.

One of the guards at the mouth of the slot peered into Poker's face, then grinned at Ceasar.

"You got a doc, eh? Well, go easy. Kragg's been out of his head half the day. He may not savvy for a minute. And he's keepin' his gun in his fist!"

Big Ceasar nodded and prodded Poker's horse forward.

There was no mistaking this layout. Renegades had found gold here off of Miercoles pass. Probably a thick glacial deposit underlying the grass carpet of the bowl. Needing hands to work their find but unwilling to share the profit, they had recruited miners as Big Ceasar had recruited the medico from Grass Valley. Poker saw worn men, stoop-shouldered and dull of face in the doorways of shacks. Most of them were without shoes. The clothing of the lot was ragged and out-worn, plain indication of how long they had been locked in this slave camp.

A patch of gray canvas in the twilight under one wall drew his attention. A rough score of tented, weathered shapes were clustered there. Murphys. Murphy wagons. Some stood as if they had just rolled in from a bitter trail. Others had been stripped of wheels, of planks and bits of hardware needed in the camp.

As Ceasar called a halt and swung down before the one presentably livable shack in the bowl, the realization of the thing into which he had stumbled hit Juan Poker with jolting surety. Here was the Lonnegran Party!

DRIVEN by the tinsel madness which took wagons where no wagons had ever gone before—pressed by the eagerness of the Overland to reach the diggings ahead of someone else, the Lonnegran string had heard Miercoles was a short route to the Sacramento valley. They had not waited to hear anything else. Or, if it was told them, they scorned in their desire for haste.

Trail fortune had decreed that it was not the natural barriers and treachery of Miercoles which should do them evil, but the scheming of a renegade crew.

Here was the Lonnegran Party. Here, also, was work for Juan Poker, whom men called reckless and invincible. Poker knew he was neither. He weighed his odds as few others did. And he knew the limits nature set upon him. This was no simple quarrel with a gold-camp bully, to be settled in a moment of steady nerve and levelled sights. This was no battle between a humble *ranchero* and the greedy land-thieves which followed the wagons to California—a battle in which a gun-hand could sit in calm judgement and afterward execute the sentence he passed down on merit and justice.

Here was violence and greed and savagery, organized by one man and carried out by many. The odds were too great for Long John Poker, gun-doctor. But for a medico whose weapon was his kit. . . .

Poker grinned to himself as he lit down. A man who chanced nothing never won.

Cesar laid a cautioning hand on his arm, then shoved the door of the cabin open. Cesar moved fearfully. But no violence greeted him. He shoved the door wider and stepped into the room. Long John followed him. The stench of rotting flesh was strong in the darkness. A man lay on a bunk, his eyes closed and his face swollen with fever. His breathing was labored and heavy. A bloody swathing of bandage was across his chest. And a heavy gun lay on the floor where it had fallen from his limp hand.

"Kragg!"

Cesar called the name out softly. The man on the bunk didn't stir. Looking at the slitted mouth, the heavy jaws, the sloping head of the man, Poker understood when even a giant like Cesar feared him. Every line of feature and frame boasted a terrible brutality, a will shackled by no restraint.

When Kragg did not answer, Cesar obviously eased. Long John moved forward, opening his kit and calling for a light. Cesar touched flame to a lamp and brought it to the bunk. Poker pulled back the bandaging and looked at Kragg's wound. It was a terrible thing, surrounded by gangrenous tissue. Cesar *chucked*.

"Old Lonnegran did that with a pick. He was dead—hit by half a dozen rifle slugs before the swing was half finished. But he'd put everything he had into it and Kragg didn't jump back fast enough. The tine of that pick damn near stuck out Kragg's back. He dragged it out with his own hands and beat in the head of the nearest pilgrim with it. Didn't even think he'd need a doc till things started gettin' worse yesterday. Kragg's all man!"

Poker nodded. No doctor in the world could save the man. One glance was enough to know this. But a medico from the outside without a patient in this camp wouldn't last long. He'd work his heart out in the sluices and pits as the brow-beaten emigrants were forced to do. Or he'd be shot for attempting escape. Either way, the end was the same. Death.

"Plenty all man," he agreed. "Tomorrow or the next day we'll have his fever down. In a couple of weeks he'll be walking," he lied. Then his face grew sharp and his eyes bright with cunning. "But he's not much man right now. Not much more of a man than that cart-driver you left out in the pass—"

"With a bullet in his head—" Cesar finished. His brows drew down with

Tom W. Blackburn, creator of the unforgettable Juan Poker, has a story you'll want to read in the current issue of DIME WESTERN. It's called "Shirt-Tail Hero," and in it you'll find the same warm, flesh-and-blood human touches and the same swift-moving drama that characterizes this gifted author's work. Buy DIME WESTERN today!

thoughtfulness. "He's out—Kragg, I mean. Out cold. He won't know what's turning?"

"Not before morning," Poker agreed. "Now, get me some hot water!"

The next half hour was one of the worst Poker had ever spent. He made a pretense of ministering to the doomed man on the bunk. And as he worked, he watched the color of the face and listened to the tempo of the breathing. Kragg would die before morning. He knew that. But he wanted him to live as long as possible. Long enough to give Big Ceasar's greed its chance.

Finally he straightened above the injured man, pulled the blankets up, and poured a powder haphazardly from one of the unreadable labelled bottles in his kit.

"I'm done in," he announced to Ceasar. "I've got to have a touch of sleep before I can do more. He'll be all right, but somebody's got to stay with him. In half an hour pry his jaws open and get some of this down him—"

He added water to the powder in the glass, closed his kit, and went out into the night. Paso, having put up the horses, was moving toward the cabin. He stopped Long John.

"How's Kragg?"

"He'll do. Ceasar's setting with him. He sent me out."

"Big Ceasar did?"

Poker shook his head with a surprised look.

"No. Kragg did. He still thinks he might die. Said he wanted to tell Ceasar something about dust. Likely out of his head."

"Dust!" Paso bleated. "Out of his head, hell! Kragg's been hidin' our take all along. He's the only one that knows where it is. So Ceasar's going to know too, eh!"

Paso brought himself up short, shot an angry look at Poker and wheeled away. Long John rubbed his hands with satisfaction. That talk of dust had been a shot in the dark. But it worked. This was a precarious business, posing as a medico and playing a hunch on the natures of men to the hilt. But the odds against him left no other way open.

He watched Paso move down to talk to the guards at the mouth of the slot. Presently Paso came back and went into a cabin which was obviously a bunk-house. Poker's grin widened. That talk of dust had erased the caution which would normally have

been in the man with a stranger in the camp. Long John moved on quietly among the buildings, unchallenged.

He found a man and a woman hunkered in dull silence on the rude step of the poorest of the cabins. He dropped beside them, failing even then to draw their dull attention. He sat for some time in silence. Finally he spoke quietly.

"If I found a way out of here would I have any company when I went?"

CHAPTER THREE

"Here's Your Powder!"

NEITHER the man nor the woman turned their heads. Poker rose and moved on. He looked back after a dozen yards and saw both figures on the step were gone. He grinned again and began a slow circling of the bowl, marking as he went where the horses were tethered and how many of the Murphys were still in shape to roll. Midway through this circuit, perhaps half an hour after he had left Kragg's cabin, a single shot split the night—a sound dulled and sodden as though fired inside of walls. Poker's grin became a flat and grating chuckle of satisfaction.

A moment later the door of the bunk-house he had earlier marked burst open and Paso bounced out, racing toward Kragg's cabin. After Paso, tumbled a dozen others, growling angrily. While Poker watched these a soft step sounded behind him and the woman who had been on the steps of the poorest cabin touched his arm.

"Big Ceasar has just killed Kragg," she said. "There'll be trouble. Come!"

Poker nodded.

"I know," he said quietly. And he followed the woman. She circled the camp, driving straight for the weathered, stranded Murphys.

The pitiful remnants of the party Lon-negran had started west was hunched among their wagons. In this extremity of what they believed to be fresh danger at the hands of their captives, the labor-dulled minds of the emigrants could conceive no safer haven than their solid wagons. The woman's husband touched Poker's arm as he came up.

"There'll be a fight for power with Kragg dead. Power and the gold. Ceasar has

friends. There are others who are afraid of him. Paso had friends, too. They have wrangled for Kragg's favors. They'll wrangle for his power, now that he's dead. We'll hide. We'll keep out of the way. They won't see us. We won't be hurt. You're a prisoner like us. You hide, too!"

The man was almost babbling. Poker stared at him. He had not expected this. He had thought that when opportunity for a break was made for them, these people would swing into it. Yet he saw that these cowering shadows would take no step of their own accord. He reached out, snagged the man's shoulder.

"There are mules enough left for these wagons?"

The fellow nodded dully.

"How long would it take to get ten wagons inspanned and ready to go?"

The man swung his head in helpless speculation.

"Ain't any wagons going to roll out of this valley!" he said heavily. "Those devils would get out their whips again—and they'd start on the women!"

Poker gripped the man's shoulder—hard.

"What's your name?"

"Lonnegran. Bill Lonnegran. I'm the old man's son."

The answer was heavy, dispirited. Poker shook the shoulder savagely.

"The old man didn't quit. Not till they stopped him with lead. He fought, with only a pick in his hands! Get those wagons inspanned—every one that'll roll. Get 'em loaded and set for a rush at the slot. If Ceasar or Paso or anybody else comes around afore I'm back, use a club or a clevis pin. They won't start on your women if you start on them first! Move, Lonnegran!"

The man's dullness seemed to lift a little. The woman pressed against him. Her eyes were luminous, restoring her youth and beauty with a hope.

"They're fighting among themselves, Bill," she whispered. "Maybe there's a chance, now. Maybe there's a chance—"

Young Lonnegran pulled away from Poker's grip and moved toward the hunched figures of the other men. Across the bowl, guns barked angrily. Poker called after him.

"I'll want one can of powder and a short fuse primed. You know where to find it. Get it. How, I don't care. But get it!"

Poker swung, then, toward the crashing sound of gunfire rocking among the cabins. Big Ceasar's voice raised in a rallying yell. It was answered and the firing increased in pitch as more of the renegades joined one side or the other. Ceasar had come out of Kragg's shack and was holed up between two other buildings.

Paso and his attacking force were fanned out on two sides of these, trying to work in for a sudden kill. Poker swung wide, dodging from shelter to shelter like a wraith, working closer to Ceasar's position. Finally he saw his chance and made a swift dive between the buildings. A figure raised in his way. He drew and swung his gun in one motion, cutting the man down with a hard chop.

A moment later he sprawled in flatly beside Big Ceasar, just under a shot one of the big man's followers flung at what he thought was an enemy sortie. Ceasar gripped Poker, rolled him until he could see his face, then freed him with a gust of surprise.

"Doc! You damned fool, how'd you get in here?"

"I heard Paso talking to somebody back there. You're after the gold, too?"

Ceasar's big hands locked around Poker's throat.

"Think we're tossin' lead through these planks for fun?" he growled. "What about Paso and Kragg's gold?"

Poker fought with convincing mildness to free himself.

"Paso's making this fight on purpose to cover up," he sputtered. "He knows where the gold is hidden. He's getting a wagon. I heard him order it. He and two others are going to load it and get out through the slot while the rest hold you off."

Ceasar swore.

"You've saved your neck with this yarn, Doc," he said. "Your ticket was punched. If we box Paso account of what you've said, you've got a cut coming out of that dust! So Paso's got a wagon, eh? By hell, if he takes anything out of the Hole on it, it'll be his own carcass! Spade, you and Harris come along—quiet, now!"

Poker's thin grin came back. There were times when a man could fight without firing a shot. The greed of others was a terrible weapon—if it worked. The man named Spade hung back.

"Paso was lying. Only Kragg knew where that dust is. And he wouldn't talk!"

"No?" Ceasar barked savagely. "He talked to me afore I paid him off—long and loud, to save his skin! And if he talked tonight to me, he might have talked to Paso before. Get a move on!"



POKER followed the trio unchallenged. With high stakes, treachery and violence facing him in the darkness, Big Ceasar had no attention to spare for the medico he had shanghaied on the Miercoles trail—the long-gearmed medico who had lacked the sand to fight back at his abductors. The big man drove straight for a low hummock west of the slot. The four of them, withdrawing from the tangle about the cabins, drew no attention for some time. They were almost to the hummock before a thin yell of alarm went up behind them.

Ceasar ignored the yell. Poker did not. If his planning was right, Paso had sounded that yell when he discovered Ceasar was gone from the cabins. The hidden gold and the hope of getting it would draw Paso as it had his big companion. At the foot of the hummock, Ceasar barked swift orders.

"We'll play Paso's game. But we're first here. We'll be first away. Harris, get a *carreta* and a couple of shovels. The Doc and Spade and me'll cover you from here if you're jumped. Make it quiet!"

Harris slid into the shadows and vanished. The gunfire which had been at the cabins was moving slowly across the bowl—Ceasar's men, left behind, now slowly retreating before Paso's frantic drive. Minutes dragged. An occasional rifle dropped lead about the hummock. Ceasar scorned it, his eyes searching the shadows. Presently there was a creaking and a *carreta* rolled up. Poker found a shovel thrust into his hands and Ceasar scuffed a mark in the gravelly slope of the hummock.

"Make it fly, Doc!" he growled.

The shovel bit. Harris swung its mate. Poker wondered what savagery Ceasar had used to pry his secret from the dying Kragg before a bullet in his head ended his fevered suffering. The earth was soft, recently disturbed. Ceasar had the right place. Harris uncovered the first buckskin bag. Poker found the next. They came swiftly after

that, a loot which grew to staggering size, heaping up high in the large bed of the *carreta*.

There was a sudden upsurging of fire in the center of the bowl. Poker scowled. The balance of Ceasar's crew, perhaps realizing they had been deserted or betrayed, had collapsed. And Paso's half of the divided, greed-torn renegades of the Hole were driving forward in a full charge, now. Lead sang angrily against gravel. Harris and Poker still swung their shovels, but the blades bit into no more leather. Spade standing above them, suddenly sighed and went flat on his face. Ceasar leaped into the *carreta*. Poker had been watching. He was only an instant behind the big man. Harris climbed clumsily from the hole as the cart started to move. He called out sharply. Ceasar's gun barked and Harris went down.

The *carreta* hit an obstruction and rocked wildly. Ceasar lost the reins. Poker caught them.

"Drive, Doc!" the big man howled. "I'll hold 'em off. Circle fast and hit for the slot!"

Poker's hand's twined in the reins. A pair of bronses were in the harness, indication that Lonnegran had rounded up the mules and Harris had been forced to take what he could find when he went after the cart. He lashed the animals into a wild and reckless run, circling the Hole. Paso's men dropped to the grass for cleaner shooting. A slug ripped a splinter from the planking of the cart and stung a nasty furrow across Poker's cheek. He heard another slug hit Ceasar full. But the big man only shook his head savagely and stubbornly answered the fire.

Reaching the far side of the Hole, the *carreta* suddenly plunged among the shadowy shapes of the Murphy wagons. And Ceasar saw the teams inspanned on each. He screamed out an unintelligible command to Poker. Long John sent his own voice roaring across the bowl, then.

"Drive, Lonnegran! Drive for the slot!"

The Murphy's leaped into sudden, cumbersome motion. Ceasar tumbled forward in the cart, his gun swinging swiftly toward Poker as a vague realization of the thing which had happened struck him. Poker didn't wait. Dropping the reins, he leaped from the *carreta*. Ceasar flung one shot at

him. Then, as Poker hit the ground, his own gun spoke. Ceasar staggered, slewed over the side of the cart, and rolled limply in the wheel-torn grass.

Paso's men, apparently now augmented by many of Ceasar's crew who were beginning to understand what was happening, angled toward this new sound of firing. Poker ran fifty yards to where he had earlier marked the Moreno pony, disconsolately standing still saddled. He hit stirrup, went up, and hurled the pony on after the racing *carreta*. Heading the team of the cart, he caught a bridle and forcibly dragged the racing broncs on a new course toward the slot, through which Murphy's were already rolling.

As he reached the head of the canyon leading down to Miercoles, a man stepped out in front of him with something under his arm.

"Doc—Doc! It's Lonnegran. Here's your powder!"

"All the wagons out?"

"All of 'em!"

"Good. Then here's the gold you've broken your backs to mine for somebody else. Take it and go on down Miercoles. But watch for slides!"

Young Lonnegran looked at the buckskin bags on the floor of the cart. He swore softly.

"Doc, we've got to move. And there's

something the rest will want to give—"

Poker cut him short.

"You move. I've got another chore. Down on the Sacramento when you are settled, a *paisano* or a miner or a trooper or a padre will come to you in the name of Juan Poker. Repay him what you think you owe me!"

Poker wheeled with the can of powder, touched its fuse alight, and flung it from the Moreno pony almost into the face of Paso and the first of the renegades. Even as the powder went, slowly lifting a great screen of debris and tumbling rock, Poker put the Moreno pony down the slot after the Lonnegran train. And behind him the shoulder of a mountain broke cleavage to settle with an awesome, increasing rush, blanking out Paso and the remainder of the renegades, choking the head of the slot and sealing the Hole where the greed of evil men had brought about both the enslavement and the salvation of a lost string of wagons.

Poker whistled as he rode out of the dust. For a few hours he must lag, waiting for the Lonnegran string to debouch from the western end of Miercoles. There, where many roads branched, he could turn off and find flat going. He knew, now, how the Moreno pony performed in a mountain pass. There remained but to test its speed at level sprinting. This done, he would be satisfied. . . .

THE END



AS BLOODY AS ANY LEGEND OF THE SPANISH MAIN

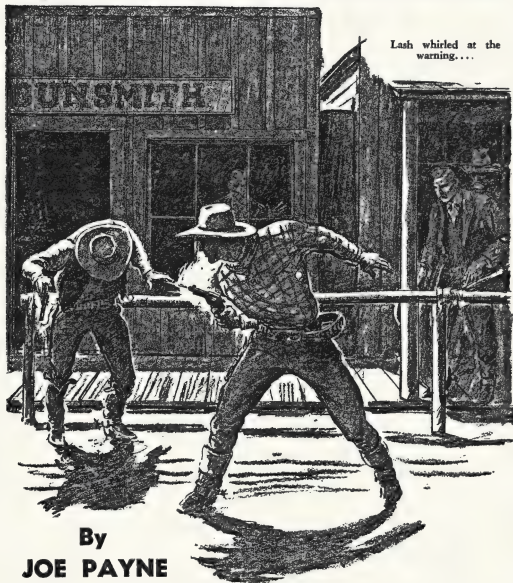
is the saga of the freshwater oceans on our northern border and the men who carved their history with sword and cutlass. Anton Louis Marie Demarest, man without a country, without a king, was one of these and his thrilling story is told by R. A. Emberg in the swash-buckling novelette, "Sweetwater Pirate," in the March *Adventure*.

In the same action-packed issue, Brian O'Brien brings back Trader Leeds in "Jungle Jeopardy," a gripping yarn about the gin-swizzling little cockney ivory-poacher who played commando in the Cameroons

and won himself the title of Silent Walker, King of the Bulus. Plus exciting stories and articles by H. Bedford-Jones, M. A. Shumard III, Stanley Vickers, F. R. Buckley and many others, and the next installment of M. V. Herberden's serial, "Traitor Unknown." Also the verse, fact features and departments you can find only in the great, new 164-page—

Adventure
25c

Open House for Gunhawks



Lash whirled at the warning...

By
JOE PAYNE

*Jim Lash had to face the deadly guns-
wift of the Cross W's ace lead-
slinger—or give up the claim that
would wreck the ranch of the girl
he loved!*

THERE was trouble in store for the Anchor brand. Jim Lash was sure of that when he saw Barstow's horse by the ranch-house porch. Lash dismounted at the corral gate, a tall man, lithe and young, his legs slightly bowed from years of riding. With deliberate movements he pulled off saddle and bridle and turned the buckskin inside.

A tightness grew on his brown and flat-cheeked face as he hoisted his accoutrements to the top corral rail and drew cigarette makings from his shirt pocket. Barstow hadn't wasted any time, he thought. "Lash!"

It was Holly Render calling from the porch. Lon Barstow had followed her out, Lash saw. The big rancher was leaning against the center post, whirling his silver watch-fob idly while he talked and smiled.

Lash waved to them briefly. He walked toward the porch, slapping at the gritty dust on his shirt and jeans. His antagonism was strong within him as he met Barstow's dark gaze.

"Of course, you know each other," Holly said.

"Hello, Lash."

Lash nodded. He waited for the girl to continue. She looked small beside Barstow, he thought, but filled with confidence and illusions. Her red lips, wide and full, were parted eagerly and her hazel eyes were glowing at some inward vision. Lash felt a stab of pity for her. He wanted suddenly to put an arm around her shoulders and explain things about this country and Lon Barstow.

"Mr. Barstow thinks that we should build a storage dam on Vermillion Creek," Holly said. "I like the idea. But I realize that I'm new at the Anchor. As foreman, what do you think about it, Lash?"

"Can you finance it?" he asked gently.

She looked surprised. "Yes, with Mr. Barstow's help."

"I have a neighborly interest in Miss Render's welfare," Lon Barstow declared. "Although I'll freely point out that the dam would benefit my Cross W, too. The only practical site is at the canyon head on Anchor land but the storage pool would form partly on my property. In these dry years it would insure water for both brands."

"Isn't that true, Lash?" Holly queried.

"About the water, yes."

"I haven't much capital," she went on. "But Mr. Barstow has offered to build the dam in return for a mortgage on the Anchor."

"Or on the Anchor herd," Barstow said. He met Lash's look blandly. There was a sardonic gleam in his black eyes and an open acknowledgment of conflict.

Lash flipped away his cigarette butt, his anger stirring. "I don't like it," he said with finality.

The girl's eyes widened. Color mounted in her cheeks. "Why not?"

Lash looked past her, trying to arrange his thoughts. What he had to say was an old story to people in Vermillion Valley but it would be new and almost incredible to this Eastern girl. At the moment it would be only his word against Barstow's.

"Mortgages are easy to give but hard to pay off," he told her bluntly. "Especially when Lon Barstow holds them."

She stared at him. "What do you mean? Surely you're not insinuating—"

Barstow laughed. "I told you what to expect, didn't I? You see, Miss Holly, I'm a business man. A rather successful one, if you'll pardon me, and so I've had to contend with the jealousy and opposition of some less foresighted."

"He's foreclosed many a mortgage in this valley," Lash warned. "Ten years ago he owned less than a section along the Vermillion. Now he owns nearly all of the valley except the Anehor."

"I believe in progress," Barstow said. "Now no one can deny that our dam would vastly increase the value of Anchor property. But the old line cowmen hate the change from the old, easy, inefficient methods and they blame the progressive man for their failures. You see that Lash dislikes me. So did his father, who was foreman here before him."

"That's so," Lash said harshly. "So did Cal Render."

"My uncle never mentioned that in his letters," Holly said coldly.

"Your Uncle Cal was a reasonable man," Barstow asserted. "If he had lived I would have made him this proposition. The truth is the Anchor is going to seed through lack of foresight and plain hard work."

"That's a lie!" Lash said.

"I'll overlook that," Barstow continued, his eyes a-glint. "What I said is true. I'm afraid Lash's father spent more time hunting gold along the Vermillion than hunting cattle among the draws."

With an exclamation Lash stepped toward him. He drove a fist under the other's up-flung arm and his knuckles met Barstow's jaw with a satisfying jar. The

big rancher reeled backward. He thudded to the floor of the porch and lay sprawling.

"You've had that coming a long time," Lash said tightly.

Barstow heaved to his feet, his face livid. With an obvious effort he controlled himself.

"You'll regret this," he said, breathing hard.

Holly's eyes were wide with shock, then her anger flared. "Maybe it was the truth that hurt you. I'll give you your time."

Lash nodded speechlessly. His rage was gone and he was filled with self disgust. He had been like a brainless puppet dancing to strings in Barstow's hands, he thought. Now Holly Render was alone against the land hog.

"I'll go," he said, but his mind was busy at once on another matter. . . .



THE crimson-bedded Vermillion was aglow in the morning sun as Lash rode along its banks, heavy laden. At the edge of Anchor land where the little river wormed its way into its canyon hole, he dismounted and stripped the buckskin and hobbled him in cottonwood shade.

From his saddle bag he took out a gold-pan and tossed it down beside the shovel and pick he had brought. Rolling a cigarette then, he sought the shade and smoked and waited.

The sun rose higher and blistered the range. Cattle bawled occasionally within the scrub along the stream bed and in the draws. Finally a drumming of hoofbeats rose from the east and came closer.

Lash got up and threw away his cigarette. He shoveled some gravel into the gold-pan, squatted by the water and began the rocking panning motion. The hoofbeats rolled up behind him and stopped. He panned on industriously.

"Lash!"

He turned. She was sitting rigidly in her saddle, watching. Lon Barstow was beside her, astride his bay gelding.

Lash pushed back his hat and rose, tense with the fear that she might already have signed the mortgage. "Good morning," he said.

"I gave you your time," she pointed out shortly.

"I know," he said, shrugging. "But a man must live."

"You could get top hand wages anywhere," Barstow said, his lip curling. "What's your game?"

Lash smiled. He rocked the gold-pan idly.

Holly's expression softened. "Look, Lash," she said, "you're welcome to prospect this creek anywhere on Anchor property except this spot. But you'll have to move from here. We're going to start building the dam here soon."

"You're wrong," he told her gently. "There won't be any dam here."

Her brows lifted. "Why do you say that?"

"This is my property. I won't let you flood it."

She turned to Barstow, bewildered.

The rancher was narrow-eyed. "Your property?" he said. "You mean a gold claim, I suppose."

"Two of them," Lash answered. "You reminded me of them, yourself. My father and Cal Render first came to this valley as prospecting partners. But Cal soon took up land, while dad stayed at hunting gold along the Vermillion. Later on, dad gave it up and became Cal's foreman. But he kept his claims along the creek. Now they're mine."

"Is that true?" the girl asked Barstow.

"It could be," he answered thoughtfully. "Probably is."

She faced Lash, suddenly contemptuous. "What's your price?"

"No price," he replied evenly. "Prospecting is in my blood."

She was taken aback. Then her cheeks flamed. "Last night," she said bitterly, "I was almost sorry I'd fired you. Now I'm glad."

Lash held her gaze until she turned it again to Barstow.

"It looks like the dam is out," she said. "So there's no use now in drawing up the mortgage."

The big man gathered up his reins, his face smooth. "It's a question of dog-in-the-manger," he said. "But things may change."

Lash was filled with relief as he watched them ride out of sight. He built another cigarette and went back to the cottonwood shade, puffing thoughtfully. He had won

the second round. Holly Render wouldn't sign a mortgage now as long as he stayed on his claim. And sooner or later she would find out for herself about Lon Barstow. . . .

By the Vermillion the town of Wickiup sprawled in the sun. Heat waves shimmered along the dingy walls of its buildings. Lash rode the buckskin down the single street and dismounted in front of the gunsmith shop, his senses sharply alert.

He stood there for a moment staring across his saddle seat. The rider behind had kept his distance for the last two miles. Now he had closed the gap and was already entering the town.

Lash stepped onto the board walk, foreboding strongly upon him. Barstow had moved fast, he thought. The rider behind was Dade Salrin, the Cross W trigger man.

"Just a minute, Lash!"



THE voice was sharp and arresting. Lash turned near the doorway of the gunsmith shop. Salrin was pulling up at the hitching rail. He dismounted and strode toward the walk, arrogance in every movement of his bandy-legged frame. He stopped ten yards away, his swarthy hatchet-face tight with purpose. He had killed three men for Lon Barstow, all in open personal quarrel, and the reputation of his gun had spread throughout Vermillion Valley.

"Aimin' to buy a gun?"

The question was casual, but the skin at the back of Lash's neck prickled and crawled. He strove for calmness against the rising beat of his heart while he weighed the moment. Salrin was faster with a gun, he was certain of that. If he allowed himself to be goaded into another quarrel, his chances of survival would be slim. And the claims on Holly Render's ranch would lack an owner.

"I'm leaving mine here," he answered carefully. "The sights are a little out of line."

"That shouldn't take long to fix," Salrin said pointedly.

"I'm coming back for it tomorrow afternoon."

"I would have thought your gun was perfect," Salrin challenged. "You shot

that Cross W steer without any trouble."

Lash waited. People were watching now along the street. Others were listening discretely at open windows and shadowy doorways. Salrin was aware of his audience. It was plain from the roving of his eyes and the way he lifted his voice. That was the way he would want it, of course, he and Barstow. Plenty of witnesses to the victim's draw.

"Lash, you can squat on that claim of yours instead of workin' if you want to," Salrin said stridently. "But you can't steal Cross W beef to eat on. Do you deny you shot that steer?"

"Somebody might have shot one," Lash answered. "But I didn't."

"You're a liar!" The gunman crouched a little. His green eyes, hard and slitted, bored into Lash's.

Lash felt the muscles along his entire body tense and vibrate. He was suddenly conscious of a sickness at the pit of his stomach as he struggled to control them. He raised his arms slowly and crossed them, his thumbs pressing hard against his biceps. His lips were dry as dust and his voice, when it came, was strained and queer.

"I don't want trouble with you, Salrin. I've got work to do. Now I'm going to leave my gun."

Salrin straightened. He spat contemptuously. "Leave it, then! But don't come back for it tomorrow afternoon. I'll be waiting, just in case. If I was you, Lash, I'd get out of the valley. There's no room for cow-thieves here." He swaggered back to his horse and rode away out of town.

Lash went into the gunsmith shop, his jaw set. The sights of his Colt were out of line and he explained about it and left it. Emerging from the shop he walked back to the buckskin, the weight of his humiliation heavier with every step he took. He rode rigidly down Wickiup's street, looking neither to the right nor to the left.

Holly Render was waiting for him in front of the millinery shop. She came to the edge of the walk and stopped with a gesture.

"I couldn't help overhearing," she said. Her look was straight but there was trouble in it. "Lash, did you kill a Cross W steer?"

"What do you think?" he asked harshly. "I don't know what to think," she answered honestly. "But—" her breath quickened—"do you intend to leave the valley?"

"So you can build the dam?"

She bit her lip. "I think it's possible that you've been trying to help me," she said. "Anyhow, I wish I were sure that you would leave tomorrow." She paused. "Lash, I am going to make you a proposition. If you'll forget about your gun—leave the valley—I'll promise not to put a mortgage on the Anchor. At least, not with Mr. Barstow."

He stared at her. "Why?"

"Because—" she fought a rising agitation—"I've been hearing talk in this town. Nobody will think you're a coward if you leave. That man is a killer."

He smiled faintly. "My going wouldn't solve all the Anchor's problems. Neither would your refusal to sign Barstow's mortgage. It's only a part of it."

"I don't want your blood on my hands!" she cried. "Please go!"

He didn't answer, but lifted his hat and rode on. . . .

The night wind stirred faintly through the cottonwoods. The hobbled buckskin stamped and snorted as he foraged. Lash lay wrapped in his blanket, his head on his saddle seat. The scene by the gunsmith shop was haunting him, driving away sleep. He knew in his heart that it was more than concern for Holly Render that had held his hand. That concern had been there, yes. But how much more?

He smiled self-mockingly in the darkness. He would find that out tomorrow afternoon if he went back for his gun. *If he went back.*

A gunshot boomed somewhere in the night. Then two more sounded in rapid succession. Lash rolled out of his blanket and sat up, staring toward the Anchor ranch-house. A tongue of flame was licking at the sky. A red glow was growing beneath it.

Lash swore under his breath. Hastily pulling on his boots, he got up and ran toward the ranchhouse. Other tongues of fire were visible now.

Hoofbeats thundered out of the east and passed close by. Lash shouted after them. His hand moved automatically toward his

gunless hip, then he swore again and ran on.



THE Anchor toolshed was a mass of flames. Lash skirted it and made for the house. The bunkhouse crew were there, on roof and porch, most of them beating at flying sparks with sacks and blankets while one or two sloshed bucketfuls of water here and there. Lash caught a glimpse of Holly Render on the porch, a coat thrown over her night-dress, fighting with the others.

"The bunkhouse!" he shouted, panting. "One of you, come—with me!"

He seized a blanket and ran again. A corner of the bunkhouse roof was blazing and one of the window ledges was beginning to smolder. Lash hoisted himself to the low roof. He crawled to the corner and beat at the burning shingles with the doubled blanket. Somebody below him started pounding at the window ledge.

He coughed and choked in the acrid smoke. The flames rose and fell under his flailing. Minutes passed before he could beat them out. Exhausted, he glanced around.

There was only a glowing mass of rubble where the toolshed had been. The flying sparks were gone. And weary-moving shadows were descending from the ranchhouse roof.

Lash dropped to the ground. Holly Render was standing by the blackened window ledge. Her smudged face looked drawn and set in the glow from the toolshed embers. He studied her quietly, searching for words of comfort and finding none.

"This was only a warning," he said.

She looked at him, her lips compressed. "Was it?"

Suddenly she turned, squaring her small shoulders. "Saunders!" she called.

The cowboy left the porch and came to the bunkhouse. He was clad only in trousers and boots and his face and bare arms and torso were streaked with grimy sweat.

"Ma'am?"

"It was you who fired the shots, wasn't it?"

He nodded. "I heard a noise and looked through this window. The toolshed was

already burnin'. Then I saw a man runnin' away from it and I grabbed my gun and took a shot or two. I may have winged him. I thought I saw him grab at his arm."

Holly seemed to deliberate, then she said firmly: "Lash, it's almost incredible that you would be this vindictive over losing a job. Still—will you show us your arms?"

He stared at her, amazed for a moment, then with an angry movement he thrust out his arms.

"Which proves nothing," he said curtly. "Sanders wasn't sure he hit the one he shot at."

Sanders shifted in embarrassment. "I'm not blamin' you, Miss Holly," he said. "Lash could've set the fire and it'd have been a smart move to come back to help. However, it could've been Barstow's work as well. He could've been tryin' to scare you out. Maybe he'll offer to buy the Anchor now. For less than it's worth, you understand. But you could go back East."

Her chin lifted. "I won't!" she declared. "Uncle Calvin built this ranch and he held it for years, although there must have been trouble more than once."

In spite of his anger, Lash felt a surge of admiration for her. The girl had courage and purpose. She was worthy of a man's loyalty and respect. He knew then what he was going to do tomorrow.

Sanders eyed him speculatively. "I heard about your quarrel with Dade Salrin," he said. "If you decide to go for your gun tomorrow, the Anchor boys will ride along."

"No!" Holly put in quickly. "I don't want that."

"Neither do I," said Lash. "I'll go alone."

She gripped his arm fiercely. "I'm all mixed up!" she cried. "Maybe you set this fire. Maybe Barstow did. But I don't want you to fight tomorrow. I'd feel responsible for your death."

He released himself gently and turned in silence back toward the river. If he could kill Salrin, he thought somberly, he could at least rob Barstow of his ace.

THE Vermillion was glowing blood-red in the slanting rays of the sun as Lash rode the buckskin along the river road and into Wickiup. He pulled up

at the rail in front of the gunsmith shop and sat for a moment drawing tobacco and papers from his shirt pocket while he slowly scanned the street from under his hat brim.

Rows of cowponies drooped at the hitching rails but the plank walk itself was deserted except for a Mexican sprawling drunkenly in a doorway. Lash noted the Anchor and Cross W stock among the horses, lined up in separate solid groups. Farther up, the way he had come, Holly Render's blazed-faced bay stood solitarily in front of the millinery shop. An air of expectancy hung over the town. Lash knew it was the calm before the storm of death.

Lash's fingers trembled a little as he built his cigarette. The sick feeling was back again at the pit of his stomach. He dismounted woodenly, his heart hammering hard against his ribs. With sudden violence, he threw the cigarette to the ground and stepped onto the walk, his boot-heels thumping hollowly in the stillness.

Dade Salrin came out of the Spade Saloon across the street. He stopped in front of the batwing doors and stared, incredulity stamped on his hatchet face. Lash paused by the gunsmith shop, fighting an impulse to turn and run. *This is what fear is*, he thought, then he went on inside, his tongue and mouth bone-dry. But his stride was firm and steady.

He asked for his gun and paid the gunsmith for it. He tried the sights of the weapon and slipped it in and out of its holster. A little of the tension went out of his fingers at the feel of the smooth bone handle.

"Here's wishing you luck," the gunsmith said.

Somebody was coming along the walk outside. Lash drew a deep breath and let it out slowly through his nostrils. "Thanks," he replied quietly and he turned away.

Lon Barstow's broad bulk filled the doorway. The rancher stepped inside the room, the beginning of a frown on his heavy face as he noted the gun in Lash's holster.

"Don't be an idiot," he said harshly. "Leave it here and get on your horse and ride."

Surprise stirred faintly through Lash.

He looked at the other, seeking what lay behind his words.

"I've got my gun," he answered.

Barstow's frown grew.

"Since Salrin is working for me, I feel responsible for this," he declared. "You've got no chance with him, Lash. I've tried to talk him out of it but he won't back down. Somebody's got to." His look changed subtly, became calculating. "Leave your gun and go back to your claim and there won't be any more trouble," he offered. "Or go back to the Anchor and be Holly Render's foreman."

Lash stiffened. *So it's Holly's work, he thought. She's made a deal with Barstow to keep me from meeting Salrin.*

"Get out of my way," he said.

His fear was gone and a cold anger was in its place. Momentarily, he waited by the shop door until the pupils of his eyes adjusted themselves to the glare. Dade Salrin, he saw, had advanced to the middle of the street. The gunman stood there, his bandy legs planted slightly apart, his arms hanging stiffly at his sides.

"The fool!" Barstow muttered from the doorway behind.

Lash moved slowly across the walk and stepped into the dust, the land hog forgotten in the intensity of his concentration upon the man in the center of the street. Salrin's eyes were a green unwinking stare.

Lash moved on toward him, watching him with a singularly detached feeling of calm. Almost with amusement, he saw the gunman's mouth twitch slightly and noted the bright beading of sweat around his lips. *What's the matter with the man, he thought. Why doesn't he draw?*

"Salrin, I forbid you!" It was Barstow shouting hoarsely from the walk.

The gunman's hands trembled. Muscle bunched fleetingly along his jaw. He appeared in a agony of indecision.

It may be a trick to distract me, thought Lash, then a sharper thought came like a flashing of light. He stopped short. Suddenly he grinned at Salrin, deliberately taunting.

"Why don't you draw?" he said, raising his voice so that it carried clearly along the street. "Shall I tell you, Salrin? You don't because—"

"Watch Barstow!"

Lash whirled at the warning, palming his gun. He leaped aside, firing. Barstow's bullet tugged at his sleeve but the rancher, himself, was falling. Somewhere a woman cried out and behind him Salrin's gun blasted. A red-hot poker touched his ribs. He whirled again as another gun sounded. Salrin was lurching, his weapon in his left hand. Cursing, the gunman triggered wildly once more, then Lash's slug struck him and he slumped, face down.

Sanders came running. "I barely managed—to nick him!" he panted. "Are you—all right?"

Lash nodded. "A graze on the ribs. Thanks, Sanders."

He knelt by Salrin's body and carefully slipped up the dead man's right sleeve. A long white bandage encased the gunman's elbow. Lash looked at Sanders, smiling faintly.

"Too stiff-armed to draw," he muttered, "and too proud of his reputation to run. He had guts, at least."

He rose to his feet. The plank walks were miraculously lined with people now. Several, including Carter, the gunsmith, clustered around Barstow's still form. A group of Cross W cowhands stood in front of the Spade Saloon, their faces expressionless. Near the Prairie Dog a few doors down, the Anchor men silently watched the Barstow crew.

"Sanders, you nicked him twice," Lash said loudly. "Once just now and once last night when he set the Anchor toolshed fire."

He eyed the group in front of the Spade, but no one of them spoke. A moment longer he waited, then walked to the buckskin, mounted, and turned him back down the street.

Holly Render joined him at the millinery shop. They took the river road.

"It's the way of this world," Lash said gently. "Some men must die so others can live in peace."

"I know that now," she said. "I'm ashamed that I ever doubted you." Then she asked gravely: "Lash—is prospecting still in your blood?"

"As long as it's all on the Anchor," he told her.

They smiled at each other.

BACK TRAIL FROM HELL



Two shots rocked the lawman's office!

By **JACK STERRETT**

Sorely wounded, more a corpse than a man, Frank Butcher rode into Hoedown to pin his own murder on the man who had left him for dead!

RIDING in from the Bee-Bee on Saturday night, Frank Butcher hit Hoedown an hour or two after dark. From the stores and saloons along the way there was a shine on the dust in the street. Dark prairie shut in the dim pool of light and the stars looked down from black velvet.

The sorrel sloped a hip at the rack in front of the hardware store and Frank eased down stiffly from the leather, dallied a tie-rope on the rail and walked awkwardly around to the sidewalk.

Spurs whining, he was a tall and gaunt shadow moving along the planks with the peculiar stride of the man on high heels. As he passed through them, the rays of window-light slatted him in bold relief—a man with long legs and long arms, a flat back and square shoulders, a wide hat worn on the back of his head above a lean face carved from saddle-leather.

His eyes were sky-blue. Tonight, they bore the light of a winter sky and his jaw was set, his wide mouth thin. Turning a deaf ear to the fun-ruckus issuing from Sandy's Saloon, he headed for the single dim light which was the lamp on the spur-scarred desk in Crow Anderson's brick-walled sheriff's office.

Just across the street from the sheriff's, Frank pulled to a halt for a minute or two in the black shadow of the blacksmith shop, which was closed for the night. Protected by that shadow, he studied the horses tied to the rail in front of the jail. Crow's dun was there—and Brad Miller's big bay mare.

The corners of Frank's mouth pulled down as he made sure that the mare was Brad's. Well, this was what he had expected, that Brad Miller would come straight to Crow Anderson with his purring, oil-slick brand of talk.

Brad wasn't cut so he could let things take their course. He'd figure that he'd have to cover his trail. And so there was his horse in front of the sheriff's. He'd be inside telling Crow a tale.

Frank spat the dried and cottony saliva from his mouth and straightened his shoulders, then started across the street. If anybody had been watching, they'd have seen how he stumbled in the soft dust and nearly pitched forward, then gathered himself erect and strode ahead, the dust spurting up from under his boots in little puffs like powder-smoke. His legs worked in an odd wooden manner, almost like stilts.

He could see into the office as he drew near, could hear the low rumble of Brad's heavy bass and the almost inaudible murmur of Crow's soft-voiced replies. He could see their feet, hung by their spurs, on the

edge of the old flat-topped desk—Crow's ancient and well-worn old Nocones boots and the flashy and ornately hand-carved ones that Brad affected. Then he was hoisting himself stiffly up the steps and moving into the room to face them, an ashy pallor beneath the tan on his cheeks, the sweat of painful effort on his long upper lip.

The two seated men turned their heads at the sound of his entrance—then sat as though some profound and nerve-paralyzing shock had frozen them to stone. There was a drawn forty-five in Frank's big right fist and the light showed that his gray-flannel shirt was a blackened and solid mat of blood against his chest.

Near the top of that mat were two small round holes—bullet holes. And, though they were alike in remaining motionless, the two who stared at this apparition presented by Frank were as different in the manner of their reactions as they were different in person.

The little man with the star on his shirt, with the twisted nose and sharp-slanted jaw and cutting, keen eyes—Crow Anderson—looked merely as though he stared at something highly astonishing and interesting, and as though he realized in what he saw that it was good judgment to say nothing, and make no move, until asked to do so. He simply stared keenly and with shrewd speculation, and waited. There was no sign of fear on his face.

The muscular big man in the over-expensive and over-wide black Stetson, shaved as smoothly as a gun-butt and with blue-black beard nevertheless showing through the skin on heavy jowls—Brad Miller—betrayed the stark fear that struck through him at what he saw. His dark eyes were stretched so wide they showed an excess of muddy white. His heavy mouth gaped open. He, too, was silent and still—but because he was obviously stunned by horror and disbelief concerning what he saw.

The dread second passed and a faint, grim smile twitched a corner of Frank's mouth. A slight motion of his big forty-five was his greeting to the sheriff. "Take it easy, Crow." He was looking at Brad Miller while he spoke. "An' look, Crow—lemme handle this my own way, huh? Don't go jumpin' to stick your own spoon into this stew."

"My life's interestin'," Crow said softly. "As long as I may without desertin' the law, I'll go on livin' it."

Frank knew that the little lawman was utterly fearless. He knew that if Crow had figured it necessary, he would not have balked at action even in the face of Frank's gun. This was just Crow's way of saying that, so far, anything that went on between Frank and Brad was their own business—which was also saying that it might nevertheless become the law's business at any moment the law saw fit.

Frank's eyes did not move for an instant from Brad Miller and Brad simply did not move. But he began to sweat.

"Look, Brad," Frank said with low and gritty emphasis, "if it'd be a comfort to you, you can pull down your feet an' rest 'em on the floor—but put your hands on the edge of the table an' keep 'em there where I can see 'em."



THE big man complied. The movements gave him a sort of release and he swore. His stunned eyes narrowed and began a snaky darting, looking for an opening. "Well, hell, Frank Butcher—you got a nerve ever ridin' into Hoedown again. Bill Shaw wasn't shot so long ago that folks have forgiven his murder. You achin' to get yourself hung?"

"Who figures to do any hangin'?" Crow cut in softly. "Not the law, because I'm the law an' I haven't decided who killed Bill Shaw."

"Hell'ndamnation!" Brad blustered, his face darkening, "Crow, you know I've furnished you enough proof to hang this killer a dozen times!"

"When it's a case of hangin'," Crow murmured stubbornly, "I like to gather my own proof."

Frank allowed this much talk between them. There was a steady and grinding pain in his chest and he had almost beaten himself down getting here at all. His legs were trembling and he backed up against

the wall and propped himself against it. It hurt to breathe deep or to talk, but he had to begin.

"All right," he grunted, "I'm hornin' in—an' I'll herd the talk the way I want it to go. I'm warnin' you, Brad, you can hear me through, or you can make a wrong move, in which case Crow an' I will do our talkin' after—over your dead body."

The flashy big man snarled. Nevertheless, he spread his fat hands flat on the table and waited nervously and in fear.

Frank talked to Crow, but looked at Brad all the time. "I lost a pearl butt-plate offa my favorite forty-five. Brad found it an' that gave 'im a chance he'd long been lookin' for. If he could finish off either me or Bill Shaw, an' manage to throw the blame on the other, it'd give 'im a free hand to run his range clear from the Bee-Bee on down through Twenty-One an' clear to the edge of Flat-Iron. It'd give 'im a cow-empire. So he shot Bill from the brush edgin' Salt Creek an' dropped that butt-plate from my gun beside the body—an' then come high-tailin' to you with a tall tale."

"I come tellin' the truth of what I'd seen an' found—" Brad snarled—"that plate from your gun beside Bill's backshot body, tracks of your hoss nearby. I told 'im of the fact that nobody'd seen you for several days."

Frank's eyes looked unnaturally bright and there were two spots of feverish color high on his cheeks. "Sure, Brad—you're clever in a certain way. You'd found I was campin' alone in the hill-country back of my range, makin' a tally of scattered stock. You savvied that I'd never be able to establish an alibi. As for those hoss-tracks—they were fulla dust time the sheriff got to see 'em, they coulda been made by any hoss."

"My story's better'n yours," Brad growled sullenly.

"That's right," Crow said softly.

Frank nodded. "Sure—but I ain't told all of mine, yet."

There was a moment when a hot wave of pain shot through Frank's lungs and black-

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ness blotted through his brain. He thought his legs would buckle. He wondered if it wouldn't be best just to shoot Brad now, before he collapsed. But apparently neither the intently staring Crow, nor snakily watchful Brad, had seen any spasm or twitch on his face. He gathered his strength and went on.

"Crow, it was a funny thing that Bill Shaw's forty-five was never found—that he'd be ridin' anywhere with his holster empty."

"It's like I've said from the first," Brad said viciously. "When you seen that Bill was unarmed, you shot him. Your hide was plumb safe."

Something savage gleamed in Frank's eyes for an instant, then quieted to that wintry coldness again. He veered away from the subject of Bill's missing gun. "Brad's been tellin', Crow, that I been hidin' out, owl-hootin' to keep outa the hands of the law. But you know you could've found me any day you wanted since Bill was killed."

"I know," Crow murmured. "I didn't want you 'til I had my own proof."

Wild fury was building in Brad's muddy eyes.

"Take it easy," Frank ordered. Then went on. "There ain't been a day," Frank said, "that I ain't been watchin' Brad's movements from a distance. Today was the first time I could catch 'im at his place alone an' I rode down to have it out with 'im—either force the truth outa him or die atryin'."

"An' it looks," said the little sheriff, eyeing Frank's shirt-front, "that either Brad—or at least somebody—was quicker on the draw than you was. Brad's been tellin' me a story durin' the past half-hour, but he hasn't mentioned any shootin'. He said he seen you set fire to your place to-day an' ride away. It was his opinion you'd made up your mind to leave this section for good an' that we'd never see you again."



THERE was a tightening of mixed pain and final anger on Frank's drawn face. "So he's burned my place, too? It must've cost 'im an effort to do that, since he figured to take over that range. Crow—the truth is, Brad tricked me

into a late draw, shot me twice in the chest an' thought he'd killed me.

"He throwed me down a dried-up well near his place, then caved in some dirt an' planks on top of me. I don't know everything else he done, but I figure he unsaddled my hoss, drove 'im back on to my range, burned saddle an' everything in the fire when he touched match to my house."

"Damnation!" Brad exploded savagely. "You got an all-fired imagination. My story's still better than yours!"

"Yeh," said Frank, "but mine ain't finished. . . ." He drew a painful breath and, for a moment, his body trembled visibly.

"Crow, I come to. Them hunks of old plank had saved me, kept the dirt from crushin' an' smotherin' me. I managed to claw my way out an' in doin' so I found somethin' down that old well—somethin' plumb interestin'." He now tossed the big weapon in his hand and held it out on his palm for them to see. "See—it's Bill Shaw's missin' gun. There's his initials, carved on the butt. The way I see it, Brad wanted to make my alleged killin' of Bill as dirty a lookin' thing as he could, so he stole Bill's gun to make it look like he'd been shot down defenseless, then throwed that weapon down the old dry well.

"When he throwed my dead body down on top of it an' covered all with dirt an' rubbish, he must've figured he was plumb safe. Only I wasn't dead—not quite. I still ain't quite dead. I managed to borrow one of Brad's horses an' git into town."

"Brad," Crow murmured, "Frank's story is gettin' better."

"You're a fool!" Brad yelled. "Frank had Bill's gun all the time. It's all a lie, you dumb badge-toter!"

"Could be, of course," Crow admitted mildly.

"Crow," Frank protested wearily, "here I been countin' on you'd see how this set-up really is—an' all you do is change your mind back an' forth. Would it help to swing you my way if I was to tell you that I at least managed to put my mark on Brad in that gun-battle today? I creased 'im in the leg."

"I was noticin'," Crow said softly, "that he was kinda limp'in' when he come in here."

For the first time, Frank was looking at Crow instead of Brad. Apparently, in

the earnestness of his argument, he had forgotten Brad—and the burly man now made his savagely explosive bid for armed equality. He leaped from his chair, hurling it aside with a crash while his big right hand darted like light toward his thigh and the flashy, big gun there. Frank whirled and started shooting. The bellowing of the two weapons mingled and was a smoking cocktail of thunder in which neither had apparent supremacy.

But, suddenly, Brad stopped shooting. A shocked look of indecision blanked the writhing fury from his face. And it could be seen as he stood, for the instant, without motion, that there were two dark and bloodless bullet-holes in his face. One beneath the left eye and the other just over it. Then he fell all in a heap, suddenly, as though his legs had been chopped out from beneath him.

Frank managed to reach a chair. He sat down and held his head between his hands. He had not been hit again, but he had already been hit twice this day in a manner to kill most men, and had ridden twelve miles, and had then fought again.

Now he could only struggle against the sweeping tidal-wave of unconsciousness that threatened him. When he had managed to win that struggle, for the time, he sagged back in his chair and looked at Crow Anderson again.

Crow apparently had not moved from

his chair. But he must have done so. He sat with Brad's ornate and fancy gun in his hands, examining it with deep interest and curiosity. He looked up and met the question in Frank's eyes, and nodded.

"It's all right, Frank. Your arguments have finally convinced me. Brad *does* have a bullet-wound on his leg, received earlier today. You know—that sidewinder was too fancy in all his ideas an' low-minded plans. He was just like this gun of his, a lot of polish an' fancy inlays—but a killin' thing just the same. You boys have settled this justly and clear to my satisfaction. I never did believe Brad's story as much as I pretended.

"You see—Bill wasn't killed at the spot Brad claimed he found him. Bill had been shot through the lungs an' there'd been a lot of bleedin', but there wasn't any blood there, exceptin' just on Bill's shirt. An' it looked like Brad's horse had been carryin' a double load—his hoofprints was sure sunk into the ground pretty deep."

The little man was silent for a moment, gazing at the weapon in his hand. "Well, I'm satisfied, now, an' the law was put to neither trouble nor expense. Reckon I'll git you a doctor, pronto—looks like you need one. An' I'll just add this sidewinder's gun to my collection of killer weapons that have come to their fittin' end."

He looked up, then, and grinned, and Frank was satisfied, too.

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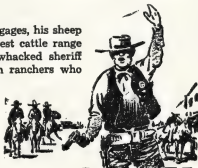
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Brick Austin knew that he was starting his return trip to boothill when he walked into the Bushwhack Crossing Bar—and branded the beautiful Nell Grover as the princess of owlhoot pistoleers!



Brick was too late for
Rope Sommers...

**Scorching Novelette of a Bush-
whacker's Paradise**

**By ART
LAWSON**

CHAPTER ONE

Bushwhacker's Haven

FROM the rimrock the ambusher could look down on the long, gentle bend of the Canadian, stretching like a shining scimitar in the sandy river bed below him. He could see the trail from the Texas settlements curling through the dark green of Wildhorse Canyon to the ford and

its huddle of shacks known as Canyon Crossing. He could see a rider coming along the trail now, trotting a big bay horse, sitting alert in the saddle.

Slowly the ambusher lifted his Winchester rifle. He had been careful to blacken the barrel with soot so that no vagrant ray of sunlight would give him away. He set the sights on the rider and followed him until the horse reached the river edge and slowed down to walk into the ford. He watched the rider lift his knees high to keep his feet dry. Then he squeezed the trigger.

The sharp bite of the rifle was a nice sound, the kick of it against his tough shoulder was a pleasant sensation. Even nicer was the way the horse reared, pawing at the sky; the way the rider was lifted out of the saddle and tossed into the water. The rider spasmodically, splashing spray high. The horse, thoroughly frightened, bucked and plunged out of the river onto the shifting sand and vanished somewhere in the group of Canyon Crossing's gray buildings.

When the river settled again the ambusher could see his victim, face down, slowly floating around the curve and out of sight, sinking as his calfskin jacket soaked up the lukewarm water.

The bushwhacker pocketed his spent cartridge case. He picked up the half dozen cigarette butts he had crushed out on the rimrock. Cautiously he backed away. Only when he reached full cover did he start to run. He kept to the down-slope of a short canyon until he came to the gray mustang carrying his saddle. Here he stopped to wipe the soot off his rifle and to clean the bore. He threw the cartridge case into the stream, shredded the cigarette butts and let the cool wind that followed the canyon to the river drift the remains through the brush. Then he rode north a couple miles.

On a spot of clear rock he unsaddled. He slapped the horse sharply on the rump, driving him away. He carried the saddle to a gulch where a second horse waited for him. This was a little Indian buckskin pony who knew his boss and whinnied as the bushwhacker came up. Nearby was a flour sack full of hard wild grapes the bushwhacker had picked up the gulch. After cinching his center fire hull down on the pony, he tied the sack behind the cantle.

Whistling he stepped aboard. Unconsciously his song took a queer twist.

*"... for that dirty little coward
Has shot Mister Howard,
And laid poor Jessie in his grave..."*

He cut north, then east to the Texas trail, then south to Canyon Crossing. Here he halted before the largest of the shanties. A sign over the door had long since weathered into meaningless gray wood and white paint marks. The hitchracks of untrimmed poplar had been chewed by a thousand horses. But no man could miss the significance of the two-way slatted half doors, nor of the ripe cool odor that flowed from the dusky interior of the place.

From Mexico to Canada this shanty was known simply as The Bar.

The half dozen men leaning against the genuine mahogany, feet on the McCoy brass rail, paid little attention to the bushwhacker's arrival. The girl behind the bar worked her pump a couple of times, then drew a beer with too much head. Lazily, automatically she slipped the foam and refilled the glass. She set it on the bar at the approximate spot where she thought the bushwhacker would stop. He came up to her grinning, setting the sack of grapes beside the beer.

"Found some," he said.

"Took you long enough," she countered.

The bushwhacker shrugged. He lifted his beer and looked over the foam at the girl. Did he suspect anything? He could not tell, for the blue eyes under long lashes had never given away any of her secrets.

"Lots of loose Comanches back there in the breaks," he said. "You got to travel careful if you expect to come back with a full head of hair."

"Thanks—anyway," she said. "I'll give you a pot of the jam when I get it made."

"Aw—forget it—" the bushwhacker said.

The girl turned away. The man's eyes followed her. Nell Grover, owner and operator of The Bar twisted him all up inside. Skin clear as a baby's, she was a girl of medium height and straight of back. She always wore a man's shirt from which the two top buttons were missing, and men's levis that she had nipped in considerably at the waistband to fit her snugly.

Yeah—she twisted up the innards of all the hombres who hung around The Bar, and of many a Texas drover who happened to be passing through with his herd.

She habitually went barefoot, enhancing

the picture a stranger would see of a girl who was soft as a kitten. But let him try to caress her silky hair or put a hand on her arm—and a knife would glitter in his eyes, a knife with a rawhide handle, with a six-inch blade made of razor steel.

She never moved from behind the bar without that knife.

Now she poured whisky for one of the men, drew a beer for another. She drifted back to the spot where the bushwhacker had emptied his glass. While beer gushed into it she said:

"A horse walked in this afternoon. No rider. Liberty Bell brand."

"Wet or dry?" the bushwhacker asked.

"Wet—" the girl said. She set the beer before the man. "He came up from the river. We were wondering—" she nodded to the other men—"if he mightn't be the ranger we heard was drifting this way."

"Could be," the bushwhacker said.

He put the beer to his lips. He had started sweating behind the ears.

"Eddie and White Feather went out to see could they find him," Nell went on as if making conversation. "We're waitin' until they get back. Then we're going through his saddle bags to see if we can find out who he is."

"Sure," the bushwhacker said. "That's a good idea. Let his folks know what come of him. Like we done with them other fellers."

"That's what we thought," the girl said.

The cowboy on the big bay horse drank in a cool clean wind that hovered over the Canadian River. It was a real blessing after the hot trip down from the Llano Estacado. Yonder across the ford was a settlement. Later, when he had sized it up, he reckoned he would come back to the stream and have a swim.

Then an angry whine startled him, a bitter whine of death, and the tough leather cap of his saddle-horn splintered, tore to bits as something like a dozen hornets stung

the front of his right leg. He did not think. He did not have time for that. He reacted automatically, the result of many years spent living with danger and dodging death. He pretended that the bullet had struck him, not his saddle, and he plunged sideways as if kicked out of the hull by the impact of the lead.

As he did so he jabbed the horse with a spur. His mount squealed, reared. The man gulped a great breath, twisted foot from stirrup, and launched himself into the lazy current of a river made shallow by summer's dryness. Very slowly he let air bubble from his mouth, relieving the pressure on his lungs.

He did not dare lift his head. He did not dare move. He kept his eyes open, watching the sandy river bottom flow so slowly under him. Finally he came to a juncture with a little creek. He swam into the smaller stream and up it until it became too shallow. Then he walked up the streambed into a canyon.

Here he removed his boots and spurs, hanging them upside-down over his shoulder. Still he did not leave the water. Better than anything else it would hide his tracks and keep his secret that he had not been killed by that single shot at the ford.

He kept going for a long time until the stream petered out. Then he moved into the brush. . . . By nightfall of the next day, limping badly, he reached Canyon Crossing and the shanty known as The Bar.

Half a dozen horses stood droop-headed at the racks. His bay was not among them. But he recognized his saddle-bags. This gave him a decided start. It was a queer feeling knowing that somebody believed him dead and disposed of and so completely forgotten they could boldly hang your saddle-bags over their own horse only a day after bushwhacking you.

Another thing astonished him about this fact. The horse that carried his bags was a spotted Indian pony.

Art Lawson, author of the story you are now reading, will be with us soon again. Meanwhile you might take a look-see at his, "I'll Wait for My Cowboy" appearing in the current issue of our companion magazine . . .

RANGELAND ROMANCES. On Sale Now!

Not many Indians were as good a shot as the drygulcher who had tried to kill him yesterday.

With this thought in mind, Brick Austin squared his shoulders and limped into the cool duskiness of the crossing's saloon.

CHAPTER TWO

Belle of the Crossing

SOMETHING happened to Brick when he first saw the girl. He glanced away from her, then looked back quickly as if he had expected she might be a mirage that would have disappeared the moment his eyes were not upon her. But she was still there, the loveliest thing he had ever seen. She was smiling.

"Howdy, stranger, an' welcome," she said. "You look like you had two flat feet, six corns and a dozen bunions."

"If I was a centipede," he said, "and all my feet were flat, I wouldn't feel any worse. I'm just about drug out, Miss."

He leaned heavily against the bar. The girl worked the beer pump. The six or seven men gathered there all ignored him. He avoided looking directly at them. He had glanced around quickly to see if an Indian was present but saw no one who would fit into that category. Could have been a squawman, he realized. Yet a fast check-up left him pretty sure that none of these men habitually forked an Indian pony. The seats of their britchers were too shiny to have been polished on that type of saddle.

The girl drew a beer which she placed on the bar before the cowboy. Her smile was wide. It warmed up Brick Austin's heart.

"On the house," she said, nodding at the beer so black curls danced. "We do thinks backward here. Give you the first. You got to pay for the rest."

Brick sipped the beer. "What do you do with a one-glass man?"

"There ain't any," Nell said. "At least I never saw one—and I've been tending this bar since I was fourteen."

Brick could not guess how long ago that might be. She was between twenty and twenty-five, he reckoned. He could not keep from staring at her. Like a wild rose, she was, growing in a canyon of greasewood. No, he changed his mind. She was

like a wild rose, all right, only she was growing in a hog range full of stinkweed.

He began to grin at the thought. Suddenly the girl's eyes flew wide and she turned quickly toward the rear of the shanty. There an open door led into a lean-to kitchen from which a hissing sound emerged.

The girl cried: "My jam!" and ran down behind the bar to the kitchen. She ran with a free, easy swing from the hips, showing a strength and agility that surprised Brick since he had thought she was soft from inside work.

"Some little lady," he said to the man next to him.

That man answered: "She's sort of queen of this country—or little sister." He thought about it a while. "Or maybe big sister, I don't know."

The man to Brick's left said: "You just lay off her, stranger."

Brick finished the beer. This was a creepy place—these men—that girl who seemed to be so utterly different from everything else around Canyon Crossing. He said to anyone interested in listening:

"I didn't exactly aim to knock the girl down, or anything like that. I just thought she was right friendly and pretty. I wanted to say I sure appreciate beauty and friendliness."

"You better go look for yours someplace else," one of the men said.

Brick was about to make a retort when a figure blocked the door to the kitchen. He glanced sidewise expecting to see the girl. Instead it was a tall, lean Indian dressed very strangely. He wore moccasins and a breech cloth. He had a feather in his dark hair. But the most extraordinary part of his attire was the plainest item. It was a shirt, a blue jean shirt that Brick had brought in his saddle-bags as a spare.

With an absolutely expressionless face the Indian announced:

"Missy make jam. Like squeeze cow. White Feather watch bar."

Brick said: "I'll have a double whisky. Whatever kind you've got. Set 'em up for everybody, Chief."

"Good," the Indian said.

He drew a pitcher of whisky from a keg and filled each man's glass from the pitcher. The man who had first spoken to Brick lifted his drink.

"Thanks, stranger," he said. "Maybe we got you wrong. Every hombre drifts in here tries to take Nell back home with him. We don't cotton to that. Here's to your health, Mister."

"Salud," Brick said.

The men drank. The one who had spoken grinned crookedly at Brick. He was a heavy-set man, not very tall. He seemed forever to be watching over his shoulder. He had carefully shaved today. He seemed a little dressed-up to Brick, as if he was going to a dance. His two holstered Colts showed plenty sign of use.

"Name of Rope Sommers," he said to Brick Austin. "Glad to know you, stranger."

Brick shook with Rope Sommers. He tipped his sombrero back so that a couple damp red curls showed under the brim.

"Some fellers call me Red," Brick said. "Some call me other names."

Rope's lips thinned over his teeth. He nodded down the bar.

"That skinny no-good there's Eddie Lowe," Eddie shook with Brick. He was a little whisp of a gray man with a gray mustache. His hand was cold and damp. "This is Joe Franco," Rope went on. Brick shook with a fat, dark-faced man who seemed to resent Rope's description of him. Before Rope could continue his introductions, Joe Franco cut in:

"French on my mother's side," he said. "Spanish on my father's. Grandee. Rope just likes to tear everything down. It makes him feel bigger."

Joe's description of his parentage did not increase in the slightest Brick's affection for the man. There was more hissing from the kitchen as another pot boiled over. Rope Sommers was distracted by the noise and the round of introductions broke down. The Indian had gotten a piece of paper which he was trying to show to Brick. Eddie Lowe, in a high voice, explained what was up.

"Gent fell off his hoss in the river yestiddy," he said. "Drowned, we reckon. Couldn't find him or no sign he'd crawled out. He was coming up from Texas. White Feather thinks maybe you know him."

"I just came down from the Territory," Brick said.

"We ain't accusin' you of nothin'," Eddie said. "Way you talk we figure you come

originally from the Brazos country where this dead feller come from. Maybe you've heard of him."

Brick said: "Maybe—could be—maybe I have."

♦ ♦ ♦

EDDIE nodded to the paper the Indian held. Brick took it, unfolded it and started to read. He had become so tightened up inside he felt as if he was going to break into a thousand pieces like a globe of glass that has been cooled too rapidly. These men were talking innocently enough. But this little drama seemed to be squeezing him into a trap.

He knew what the note said before he read it because not so long ago he had received a similar note from the same place and in the identical handwriting. The one the Indian showed him was worded a little differently, but the gist was the same.

To whom it may concern—

We regret to notify you a Mr. Horace Austin seems to have drowned in the Canadian, near Canyon Crossing on Aug. three. We are returning his horse, saddle and other equipt curtsy who has offered to deliver these things to the Austin family.

In sorrow we are yr serv't

N Grover

A blank space had been left in the letter for the deliverer to fill in. In this case the Indian apparently wanted Brick to take the note since he pointed to the blank space two or three times and said, "You." Brick felt a crawling sensation moving up his back. He would be delivering the letter to himself.

"Seems I heard of these Austins," Brick admitted to Eddie Lowe. "Didn't know 'em personal. There's a big family of them."

"Month ago," Eddie said, "another of 'em was killed by some road agents up-trail a piece. We caught his horse and sent his stuff home but never did hear from his folks. Reckon this here Austin was coming up to sort of look things over. Way we figure it his horse got scared in the ford and bucked him off and he drowned. Current washed him downstream. Tough, eh?"

Damned tough, Brick thought. It was concerning the other Austin, his brother Slim, that the first note had been written. Right now, its ink blurred by water, it rested in Brick's shirt pocket.

Then Brick realized that everyone here was waiting for him to make the next move. "Well—" he said—"I'm goin' down that way. I'd just as soon take his stuff along to his folks."

Rope Sommers had turned his interest back to the conversation. He said:

"That's sure generous of you, Red. Git a pencil, Chief." He took the note and turned it around to Brick. The Indian gave Brick a pencil. "Just sign your name," Rope said. "Or put down 'A Cowboy', or whatever you feel like."

Brick took the pencil and wrote very distinctly:

John Beaumont

Only Rope Sommers saw the name he had signed. Before anyone else could see it Brick folded the paper and put it in his pocket. The Indian nodded his head so the feather danced.

"Good," he said.

He brought over the pitcher of whisky and poured Brick a glassful.

"On house," he announced.

There was a clatter of pots in the kitchen. The girl shouted:

"Chief White Feather—come here."

The Indian hurried so the tails of Brick's shirt that he wore stood in the breeze behind him. Brick had begun to wonder. Were these people serious? Or had they just given him one of the biggest rawhidings he had ever gotten?

The Indian returned almost immediately. He was wearing a brightly colored apron over the rest of his outfit. There was a long table at one side of the barroom with a couple benches nearby. White Feather lighted a swinging lamp hung over the table. He brought some spoons and forks, a bowl of sugar, another of salt, a basket full of biscuits. He fetched some more bowls and a big pot of steaming coffee. Then the girl hurried in carrying a copper pot full of stew.

Heat from the stove had heightened her unusually lovely color. The domesticity of this scene gave Brick a curious little pang. The girl set the pot on the table and gave Brick one of her quick smiles that lifted the tempo of his heart another couple of beats.

"We all eat together when no herd's

passing through," she said. "Costs you one dollar hard money and you take your chance. If you want to sleep in our bunk-room that costs a dollar, too."

The men had pulled out the benches. Brick joined them. The girl stood at the head of the table. She closed her eyes, bowed her head and said grace. Then she served up great bowls of this stew that the men ate as if they had been starving for years. They drank coffee noisily to cool it. Afterwards, while the Indian washed the dishes, the girl sat behind the bar knitting and the men remanied around the table playing poker. Just a game of penny ante, Rope Sommers explained. Much to Brick's astonishment that was exactly what it was, small stakes and, as far as he could see, no cheating at all.

But this only helped to make him more jumpy than ever. No one had asked him where he had come from. No one seemed to take any special interest in him. And the presence of this girl in a group of men he was sure must be road agents and murderers only increased his puzzlement.

Then the girl set down her knitting and yawned, stretching like a cat.

"Going to turn in," she announced. "I need a couple buckets water. One of you gents want to haul it up from the river?"

Rope Sommers immediately volunteered. So did Brick. The girl laughed and came around from behind the bar to count them out like a child will in a game. Brick got the job. He fetched a couple of big wooden pails from the kitchen, carried them through the barroom and outside. The girl followed. It was much cooler out here than it had been in the shanty. There was a slit of a moon sitting in the sky yonder over the breaks in Texas.

When they had gone a couple dozen yards from the shack Brick said softly: "What I don't savvy is why you need this water—you have a well, don't you?"

"Sure," the girl said. "It's a fine well. Only the water's kinda hard. I have to do some laundry tomorrow and the river water's a lot better than the well water."

Her answer seemed logical enough, yet it did not satisfy Brick. The crawling up his back was growing worse every second. The feeling that he was falling inexorably into a trap grew upon him. When they reached the river the barefooted girl rolled up the

legs of her overalls and waded into the water to fill the buckets.

She brought them up to the sand where Brick stood. Taking them his hand touched hers. The contact gave him an odd little jolt. She glanced up at him quickly as if the same thing had happened to her. Her eyes were wide, her face close to his, then she wheeled away and ran back into the river up to her knees in water. She leaned down, thrusting her arms into the river and playfully splashed Brick.

"If I only had the nerve," she said, "I'd take off my clothes and jump in. Would you keep my boy friends from joining the party?"

"Sure," Brick said.

The girl splashed water over her face. Then she came out and stood dripping in the sand. She had stopped laughing.

"When Pa was living he used to let me swim down stream where a creek cuts into the river. He—ah—I haven't been swimming since then. That was last Spring."

In all Brick's life he had never met a girl he wanted as much as he did this one, and he had seen plenty of them. Lovely little dark-eyed señoritas from Mexico—girls in Dodge City—the Creoles in New Orleans where he used to deliver cattle. Odd how he had always left them alone. Had he been waiting for this one whose small, neat hand ever so gently tightened a noose around his neck?

Her face was wet and her arms glistened in the moonlight. Brick tried to look away but could not do so.

"Sorry about your Pa," he said lamely.

"Take off your sombrero," she said.

He did so, puzzled. She lifted a hand and ran damp fingers through his brick-red hair that curled so crisply. She moved around to study his profile as an artist might have done. She nodded her head and backed away a step.

"You're the brother of this Slim Austin who was murdered," she said simply. "I suspected it all along. They've already tried to kill you once. They'll try again. If I was you, Mister, I'd start drifting right now. They never fail."

If she had chosen to shoot him on the spot he would not have been more surprised. Suddenly she started to cry, silently, and he knew it only because tears rolled down her cheeks.

"They killed my Pa," she whispered. "Some day I'll find out which one did it—"

Her head tilted forward. He only intended to comfort her when he took her shoulders in his big hands and drew her up against his broad chest. But when she came into contact with him the rounded ripeness of her hit him like a piledriver. He bit his lip until he tasted blood.

"Maybe between us, Miss—" he whispered.

She broke away from him. "You've got to leave," she insisted.

He stared at her for a long while. Then he shrugged. "Okay—tomorrow—I'll take this Brick Austin's stuff and ride south to deliver it to his folks."

He had stuck out his neck that time. By mentioning the name "Brick" he had admitted the whole thing to her, and he had no way at all of knowing if she had only been pumping him when she claimed that he was Slim's brother. Maybe she had been making a wild guess. This "Pa" business—the tears. They had melted him down. Bitterly he cursed himself.

Not daring to talk any more he picked up the two buckets and started his trek to the shanty. As he did so a quick flash of light behind The Bar told him that somebody had just gone in through the kitchen door. Somebody had been spying on them.

CHAPTER THREE

Drygulch Town

HE PAID his dollar and climbed into an upper bunk in the bunkroom which was a lean-to extension to The Bar similar to the one that housed the kitchen. The girl had disappeared, apparently going to her own quarters somewhere. White Feather, the Indian who had so boldly stolen one of Brick's shirts from the saddlebags, took charge of the bar, serving whisky from a pitcher and beer from a barrel at one dollar a drink no matter which you chose.

Long after Brick learned that he could not stretch out comfortably in the bunk he still heard the soft slap of cards from the barroom. Conversation there was very low, casual, it seemed to him. Sometime during the night three horses trotted away. Later two men came into the bunkroom.

Brick watched them through slitted eyes. Judging by their profiles as they came through the door they would be Rope Sommers and Eddie Lowe. Joe Franco who claimed such illustrious parents must have gone with the other riders.

Deliberately Brick had hung his jacket on a peg at the foot of his bunk. He had slung his double-holstered gunbelt on the same peg and had put his sombrero on top of it all, hanging it by its chinstrap. He had not removed the two-shot derringer from the spring holster under his armpit. He was ready to play games with the boys if they wished to do so, but he was not yet ready to commit suicide.

Rope and Eddie were remarkably casual as they came into the bunkroom. Rope chose the bunk below Brick's as his for the night. Eddie chose the one beside Rope's and on the same level. Rope started to hang his jacket on a peg. As if it were the purest of accidents he jostled the stuff on the peg at the foot of Brick's bed. It all tumbled off onto the floor. Just in case they had not already wakened Brick Eddie caught the gunbelt and eased it down noiselessly. In the few seconds it took them to recover the stuff and hang it up again, Brick knew they had given his outfit a thorough frisking.

Rope put it back in the same order in which Brick had hung the stuff on the peg. Then he shook Brick by the shoulder. Brick pretended to wake up.

"Uhh—" he said.

"Hangin' up your coat," Rope said. "Knocked it off by accident. Just wanted to tell you. Maybe it's a little bit dusty. Sorry."

"S'okay," Brick said. "In your way?"

"Only thought you'd like to know," Rope said. "This country ain't safe. Never can tell who'll come in here to sleep of a night. If I was you I'd take them guns to bed—and any money there might be in the coat."

"Sure," Brick said. "Maybe I better."

He sat up, hunching low to keep from batting his head against the asloping roof. He rolled up the gunbelt and set it under the blanket toward the wall. Rope made a lot of creaking below him. After a while Rope began to snore. There was a good rhythmic roar to it. Brick closed his eyes. But he could not sleep even though he knew Rope and Eddie had learned nothing from frisking his outfit. He had planted that

jacket there on purpose and they had done exactly what he had thought they would with it.

The girl had breakfast ready; plenty of eggs from her own chickens that scratched in a half wild state around Canyon Crossing's shanties, bacon from a hog one of the hangers-on had butchered for her, corn bread made of meal she had gotten in a swap with some Indians.

Brick ate just a little bit too much of it because it was good and because he did not want to leave the girl any sooner than he had to. She had gotten into him, under his tough skin. He could still feel the touch of her hand in his hair when she accused him of being Slim Austin's brother. This lovely girl seemed more than able to take care of herself up in this semi-barbarous country. But last night Brick had dreamed of her while in a state halfway between wakefulness and sleep. She had been in the doorway of his ranch-house down on the Brazos, waving to him with lifted arm. In that half dream she had worn a calico skirt, not pants and shirt, and she had been all woman with an appeal that clogged his throat and beat through his arteries like miniature war-drums.

He had seen her there at home so damn plain he wanted to tell her about it now. But Brick never got the chance. Always Rope Sommers was on hand, unobtrusively keeping himself between Brick and the girl, blocking him off, giving him no opportunity to say another word to her.

And if he had gotten that chance what could he have said? Could he have said: "Ma'am, you've hypnotized me. Just the same, Miss, your story last night about your poor pa didn't fool me a bit. If you ain't queen of this poisonous outfit I'm a sheep-herder."

No, he could not have told her that. His mind insisted that the situation was as described in his imaginary dialog. His heart did not believe it. If he had been able to get alone with her he would not have been able to say anything.

He went about his affairs as they had been laid out last night. He talked about delivering the note concerning Horace Austin's untimely death by drowning in the Canadian River. While he was eating the last egg on the platter the Indian, White Feather, came in carrying Brick's saddle

bags. The Indian dropped them with a thud on the table, clattering the dishes.

"Miss say no keep," he told Brick. He pointed to the shirt he still wore. "This she say okay keep catch horse. This dead man shirt."

Brick said: "I don't think anybody would mind if you kept that. Personally I think this dead gent's folks are lucky to get back any of his stuff."

"Good!"

The Indian went back to the kitchen. Brick had a quick glimpse at the girl. Her blue eyes told him nothing. She said gaily:

"He wanted that shirt so badly I didn't think anybody would care if he kept it."

"'Course not," Brick said. He got up and went outside. Rope followed him carrying the saddlebags. It was one of those mornings that only Texas knows with a crisp blue depthless sky.

The girl did not come out to say, "Good-bay," to Brick. A clatter of hoofs cut through the silence. Rope said:

"Eddie's bringing this Austin feller's horse. Damn good horse. If anybody accuses you of stealin' it, just show 'em that

note. Everybody knows Nell Grover. Her name is better on a note than the President's."

"I'll do that," Brick said. "Well, here they come."

◇ ◇ ◇

EDDIE had appeared from behind two shacks. He was leading the big bay horse. The first thing Brick noticed was that someone had repaired the saddlehorn so that the bullet burn did not show. Then something occurred to him that he had not thought of before. He had no idea how many of these hombres knew he was still alive, that this man who called himself Red Beaumont was really Brick Austin, the Horace Austin of the note.

There was one man, though, who must know it—and that was the man who had tried to bushwhack him. Only one shot had been fired at Brick—and the broken horn would prove that that shot had not hit him.

Brick put his hand to shake with Rope. "Glad to have known you," he said. "Maybe we'll meet again sometime."

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"Maybe," Rope said.

He shook hands, but his eyes were veiled, dark and searching with a crinkle to the corners saying that he knew more than he was owning up to.

Then a vagrant breeze stirred a dust-devil in the open space before The Bar. It took Brick's scent to the big bay, and that horse whinnied, plunged ahead dragging skinny Eddie Lowe along at a run. The horse nuzzled at Brick, pushing his sombrero into a cocked angle that let more of the red hair curl out beneath the brim.

Rope Sommers said: "You'd almost think that hoss knew you."

"Wouldn't yuh?" Brick tried to laugh it off. "It—uh—he must smell the saddlebags."

"Sure," Rope said, "I got the saddlebags."

"That's so," Brick had to admit.

He took the bags, threw them over the cantle and tied them down. He felt as if he was standing barefoot on a red-hot stove stoked with dynamite. He smiled at Eddie Lowe.

"Thanks for bringin' this hoss along," he said. "Fine animal. Wish I owned one like it.

He put a foot to stirrup. As he did so Rope Sommers said coldly:

"Feller that owned that hoss was bushwhacked. You know, Mister, Eddie and I kinda think you was the one bushwhacked him. You wandered into camp kinda soon after. You was willing to take almost any chance to just get your hands on the hombre's hoss. Now it turns out you and the bay are acquainted." Brick's back was toward Rope. Rope went on inexorably: "Eddie and me ain't regular law officers," he said, "but we're arrestin' you just the same, Mister, to hold you until a law officer drifts through."

Brick could not see Rope. He did hear the soft slicker sound of a gun being drawn from leather. One foot was still in the stirrup. The bay, sensing trouble, had begun to dance. Brick had to make up his mind in a hurry.

"Okay," he said. "There's two of you— and only one of me."

There were more than only two of them. Brick was sure that Joe Franco and his friends were waiting somewhere along the

trail just in case he managed to escape from Rope and Eddie. They had planned this very well.

He started to turn. Instead of completing this move, however, he swung into the saddle and over to the opposite side. He rowelled the horse into a plunge straight for the men. In the same quick movement he reached for one of his pistols. This weapon did not feel right in his hand.

When he triggered the hammer snapped down on an empty.

Horried, Brick dropped the useless gun and reached for the other pistol. He had been sure he had reloaded after carefully drying out his guns. But this one was empty, too.

During the brief moment while Eddie Lowe had handled Brick's guns after knocking them off the peg last night, he had somehow managed to draw their charges. Brick could not believe the little fellow could have worked so fast. But the fact was in his hands.

Click—click—click. . . .

And Rope Sommers had avoided the plunging hoofs of the bay. He had gotten to the corner of the shanty where he would be safe. It was at the same instant that Rope began firing that Brick discovered he was unarmed.

Squealing, snorting, the horse bucked crazily, wildly, rushing up past The Bar into open country on the opposite side. Eddie Lowe had taken to cover where he could command an approach to the river. Rope Sommers had located himself so that he could hold Brick in murderous crossfire. Probably Joe Franco and his friends were in the brush country somewhere watching the trails north and south.

Brick had about as much chance as a rat in a rain barrel.

He felt a bullet cut his ribs like a red-hot knife. Another hit him hard, hit him in such a manner he did not know where or how badly he was wounded. He only knew that he had been struck someplace and that it left him too sick and weak to handle the Derringer he had forgotten in the original flurry of fighting.

Then another shot struck his stirrup. The horse screamed, made a mighty lunge that threw Brick over his head and into a gulch. Brick rolled over and over, smashing

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through brush that ripped at his clothing and flesh. When he hit bottom he just did not give a damn at all. He did not care about anything. He wanted to lie there forever. He wanted to die there all alone cursing out that girl who had rigged such a filthy frame and stuck his picture into it.

He wanted to die there, but first of all he wanted Rope Sommers to die, too, and maybe Nell Grover. Brick howled out his oaths. He found that he could move slightly, that he did not have to lie any longer at the bottom of the gulch with his feet up-slope and blood seeping over his chest, up his throat. He pulled his feet down after him, then pushed himself to an upright position.

He concentrated on loading his pistol. He held the gun against his knees and aimed the bullets at the loading port and pushed them in. Mean and contrary they refused to go where they belonged. He had to close his eyes, to concentrate and think, to think of only one thing, then open his eyes and try again before he became confused.

In this way he got three, four bullets in, before a commotion at the gulch's lip attracted his attention.

It was the girl. She and her friends had heard him, but had not yet seen him. They were up there beyond the gulch looking for him. She was shouting something:

"Mister Beaumont—Red—"

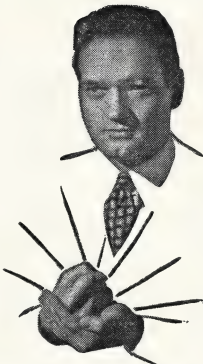
Brick leaned back against the bush under which he had rolled. He propped the revolver on his knee. It fell off. It was almost too heavy for him to lift again. This time he twisted around so he could hold the revolver with both hands. He waited, watching the rim.

"Mister—" The girl's clear voice was becoming stronger.

Now Brick thought he saw her up there, her blue shirt and pants. He thought he saw her carrying a rifle. But Brick could not be sure for she danced around like smoke from a gunshot in a morning zephyr.

Sure—that was her—she was there with her Indian. It was good-by to her—good-by to a female devil.

He squeezed the trigger. The girl shouted in alarm. She vanished. Whether it was a genuine disappearance or just in his mind Brick did not know because the recoil of the pistol kicked the weapon from his hand



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and when he tried to recover it he fell over on his face.

CHAPTER FOUR

Path of Vengeance

BRICK'S fingers fastened on the gun. White Feather reached down and took the pistol away from him. There was no expression on the Indian's face. White Feather said:

"Miss say you make too much noise."

The Indian started to slug Brick but Brick passed out before White Feather's fist connected.

Brick came back to consciousness in a smelly hut made of hooped willow covered with sun-dried buffalo hides. His chest was one huge pain. His ribs burned as if he had been branded with a running iron. Someone was washing his face with cool water. She lifted the cloth when he opened his eyes and he found himself staring straight into the face of the girl from Canyon Crossing. She was smiling softly. That wonderfully clear skin had a brown pinkishness to it now as if she had been a long time in the sun.

He went to sleep again.

Brick thought he had gone crazy in this smelly hut. Sometimes the girl fed him with a spoon. She would hold his head up against her, and give him weak soup. Sometimes the Indian would tend to the feeding. Brick would not eat when White Feather tried to feed him. He would tell the Indian to fly away home.

White Feather would say: "Good. You no eat—I break neck."

Then, because he was hungry, Brick would eat.

Once he woke with the sensation of being carried. It seemed to him as if he was being carried a long way on someone's back. Pain in his ribs and high in his shoulder dulled every other sensation. He did not know if he dreamed this—or if it was only his imagination that furnished the girl's frightened voice.

"Hurry—White Feather—hurry!"

The jogging increased in tempo.

Finally everything was peaceful again. They were back in the little shack of stinking buffalo hides and Brick lay with his

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eyes closed while the girl sang softly, while her hand moved about in the crisp brick-colored curls and stroked his forehead which now was cool for the first time since the battle at The Bar. Now Brick no longer mistook her for his mother when she sang or cared for him.

Despite himself Brick had to admit he liked this even though he did not understand it. He kept his eyes closed when the girl stopped singing for a moment to speak to someone outside the shanty.

"Find anything?"

"They all at Bar."

"Thank God," the girl whispered. Then her voice took on a more cheery note. "I'm starved, Chief," she said. "What do we have for supper tonight—some more rabbit? I've had so much I feel like hopping."

"Plenty good meat," the Indian said. "Chicken."

The girl laughed at that. Now Brick opened his eyes. She was not looking at him, but out the semi-circular opening of the shelter. He could not see what she saw there. He could only guess it must be god because her voice picked up a new ring it had not held when she talked of rabbit.

"Where'd you get those?" she asked.

"Me get 'em," the Indian said.

"Not at The Bar?" she asked incredulously.

"Where the hell else would he get them?" he asked.

The girl cried out aloud, looking swiftly down at Brick. As if stung, she drew her hand away from his forehead.

"Why—" she cried. "You're well?"

"Sure—I'm fine," he said. "What the hell's going on?"

The girl laughed. "It's a war, Mister, and we're losing it. The enemy's taken over the Crossing. The woods are full of spies. And there isn't anybody in all Texas and the Territories who could have sneaked in and stolen those chickens but White Feather. Is there, White Feather? We'll have a party."

"Good," the Indian said. . . .

Coming back to the world of consciousness was a hard job for Brick Austin. He had left it under one set of circumstances and was returning under an entirely new set. Everything was upside down and cock-

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eyed. But the chickens, roasted in a pit after sundown so the smoke would not give away their hiding place, helped very much to set things right.

"You mean," Brick asked slowly, "that you broke with Rope Sommers?"

"No," the girl said. To look at her tonight gnawing on a chicken leg you would think she did not have a care in the world. Like a hunting trip, like a vacation, this running away was to her. "You see—I never was with Sommers. So how could I break?"

"I thought you were his girl," Brick said. "That's what he told me."

"That's what he wanted you to think," she said. "That's what he wanted me to think."

"You mean you really had a Pa and he got killed last spring?"

"Of course," the girl said.

Since it had not occurred to her that he had doubted it in the first place she was genuinely puzzled that he should have asked this.

He said: "The way you were all—uh—sorta living together up there—one big happy family — uh—well — maybe I'm wrong."

Ever since he had recovered consciousness the girl's laughter and voice had taken on a light tone. She nodded to White Feather.

"You tell him," she said.

"Papa murdered. Miss make friend. White man talk, maybe, something. Tzzt!"

White Feather moved his finger across his throat.

Brick remembered the girl's knife and shuddered. He remembered, too, that he had been mighty sick in the last how long. He asked:

"Maybe I talked too much when I was fevered, huh?"

The girl began to blush. Brick glimpsed the Indian's profile and he thought he detected there just the slightest evidence of a smile. White Feather said:

"You say Miss Angel. You say White Feather Devil."

Brick said quickly: "You got to tell me something else. Where are we?"

"About ten miles upriver from the Crossing," the girl said. "In Rattlesnake Canyon. We've had to move three differ-

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ent times in the past week. We crossed the river twice. Rope Sommers and his friends are all back at Canyon Crossing right now—but they won't stay there long. For the last week they've infested this country. They'll be back."

Brick remembered being carried. Now he lay against the bed of sweet hay the girl had made for him. He watched her and the Indian in the faint glow of campfire. He saw something he had not seen before. That girl and her faithful handyman had deliberately turned against their security to help him. Even more they had not deserted him when the going became tough. They could have easily gotten away if they had not been encumbered with his half dead body. But they had brought him along, tended him, and never once let him down.

This was something great, tremendous. It swelled up inside his hurt chest.

"And I thought you were the kingpin of that bunch of killers," Brick said to the girl. "I thought you were the worst one of the lot."

For miles they had carried him up and down this rough wild country, always under the threat of bushwhacking.

The girl was looking past him, gazing downcanyon toward the river.

"You weren't the only one," she said. "Sometimes it was hard keeping up the act, smiling, cooking meals and not filling the pot with arsenic, humoring Rope Sommers who was always looking at me as if his eyes were at the tips of his fingers, making wild grape jam for him. Bah!" The girl made a sound that was pure disgust. "But I couldn't quit. I had to find out who killed Pa." She was silent then for a period of several heartbeats. Then she said: "You see—they didn't just shoot him. They tortured him first. They tortured him until he died."

"We'll find them," Brick said grimly.

CHAPTER FIVE

When Boothill Beckons

THEY moved again several times. Summer was slowly passing. The river became so narrow a husky man could throw a rock across it anywhere be-

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tween here and Canyon Crossing. Now Brick could get along okay on his own feet. His left arm was still strapped tight against his side. The numbing shot that had paralyzed him had smashed his collar bone, he had learned. Ribs on the right were almost healed.

The three existed on wild fruits and berries, on roots and herbs that White Feather found. Sometimes they snared a ground squirrel or rabbit. More than once White Feather came back after a day or two scouting with half a dozen chickens tied to his belt. He was depleting Nell's flock much more rapidly than customary.

During all this time Brick never again mentioned the girl's father to her, sensing that she did not like to discuss him. Then one day White Feather came back from the Crossing with what he thought was very important information.

"They dig," he said. "Many holes."

Nell nodded grimly. "They'll have to dig many more before they find what they are after." Brick did not ask her what that might be. He waited until she was ready to tell her. "Pa was supposed to have more than a hundred thousand dollars in gold coin and nuggets stashed away," she said. "He always did a big business at the Crossing. Folks thought he had buried the profits somewhere around. He wouldn't tell those hombres where it was."

Now Brick had learned why they had tortured her father. The girl said:

"That was only the beginning. After Pa was killed they started robbing men coming down-trail from Dodge with money from herds they had sold. We tried to backtrail the bushwhackers—but the trail always petered out." She shrugged her straight shoulders. For a moment she studied Brick. She smiled a bit crookedly. "I don't know when I thought of writing those notes. Before—your brother. I knew inside myself that you would come up to answer one of them. Not you, really, but somebody. Then you came—and I—I feel as if what happened to you was my fault."

Brick said: "That why you cared for me? Because you were sorry for me?"

"No!" the girl said with averted eyes.

It was a long time before anyone spoke. "Anyway—" Brick shrugged—"I came,

TEXANS DON'T STAY DEAD!

Thanks for sending for me. I'm just about ready now to finish up the job. In a day or two—"

Fear crossed the girl's eyes. "You're sick," she said. "Lie still."

Smiling, Brick obeyed her.

A few days later White Feather showed up with a shotgun he had stolen. Until then they had been armed only with Brick's pistol and Derringer and the knives of the Indian and girl. Now they felt ready to launch their campaign in this tiny war. There was one thing left to do. They had to secure a means of moving in swiftly once they decided to attack.

So they wove a bathtub-shaped basket of willow and alder. Over this they stretched the hides that had formed the roof to their shelter. They cut poles with which to push their crude little craft and then one night took the canoe down to the river for a trial run. As a boat it was cranky, unreliable, worse than a blind buck who had been weaned on loco weed, Brick said. But it floated. It held the three of them. It would take them to their destination silently, speedily.

That day White Feather went out on a scout while Brick and Nell carefully plugged up all the leaks they could find in their flimsy boat. They tried to sleep during the heat of the day but were too nervous to do so. Along about sundown White Feather came silently through the brush.

"Still dig," he said. "Plenty holes." He squatted down, raised a hand about head high as if shooting a pistol. "Boom."

After that Brick and the girl could not wait. The moment it was dark enough to hide the river from anyone watching from the rimrock they launched their canoe. Nell took the bow of the rickety boat while White Feather poled from the stern. With his left arm out of condition Brick could only sit on the bottom with alert pistol and watch the graceful swing of the girl's shoulders as she worked the pole.

It was well after midnight when the bow scraped softly against sand and the girl jumped out. They had reached the ford. Lamplight flickered in The Bar. Where the other buildings had been nothing now stood except piles of earth. The girl pulled the rickety vessel farther up

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the sand. Brick climbed out. He was armed with a pistol. Nell had the Derringer. The Indian carried the shotgun.

White Feather followed Brick from the craft. For a moment they stood there crouching with an unconscious desire to hide their presence. Then they deployed to edge up on The Bar and the men who were drinking inside. . . .



BRICK went to the door with its familiar odor of cool beer, past the drowsy horses who were always ready for an emergency, and stepped over the threshold to find himself facing Eddie Lowe who was tending bar because he was the smallest of the outfit and not much good for digging. Two other men were standing with backs to Brick. They were arguing among themselves. Two others were not here tonight.

"I don't believe the old man had—" Joe Franco was saying.

Eddie saw Brick in the doorway. Eddie gulped hard. He said very quickly:

"I didn't have nothing to do with this. I was innocent."

The men who had been talking about Nell's father said: "Shut up!"

Judging by his back Brick guessed that Rope Sommers was beginning to suspect that something irregular had happened. Because they had guards on the only two roads to Canyon Crossing they had become overconfident. Rope turned his head as if afraid to look around. When he recognized Brick he did not waste a fraction of a second. He reached for his gun.

Eddie ducked behind the bar. Joe Franco, the man with the distinguished parents, wheeled to gaze at Brick. Then Brick began shooting. As if an echo, he heard another shot outside. It was followed by a volley in which he recognized one explosion of his Derringer, then the great boom of the shotgun. One of the guards had spotted the canoe and come to investigate. The other, apparently, was running into the battle.

Brick was terribly slow. He just barely managed to kill Joe Franco before that man plugged him. He was too late, though, for Rope Sommers. Rope had not been

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doing much of the shovelling and had kept his hand in shape. Aiming from the hip he put a chunk of lead into Brick's thigh that spun the cowboy around and dropped him outside the door.

Rope sprayed the threshold with bullets, kicking splinters into Brick's face. But Brick had managed to move aside. He heard Nell scream something not many feet away.

So he reached up for the doorjamb and hauled himself back into The Bar. He shouted and howled. He felt the mean whine of a forty-five slug that chipped a chunk off his sombrero. Then his sights were in line and his gun was barking.

Rope Sommers began to whimper. He dropped his colt. He went to his knees.

Brick slid forward, too, hardly able to keep himself off the ground with braced elbow. He was looking for Eddie Lowe but never did get a shot at him. The girl had jumped over Brick, running on silent bare feet. When Eddie looked over the bar to see what he could do, she knocked him cold, using the Derringer as she might have used a set of brass knuckles. . . .

Snow was drifting down from the Territory when the trio headed south to the Brazos. A wandering preacher had been by not so long ago. He had objected to using a heathen Indian as a witness but had been persuaded when told that White Feather was a very important chief. Then he mumbled a few words and the magic was done.

Brick reminded Nell of it as they trotted through the clean snow.

"Down home they'll say I married you for your money," he gently rawhided her.

The girl kned her horse over closer to his. Her money—her hundred thousand dollars—as far as she knew it was one of those rumors and did not exist. But if it had been real she would not have touched it, so soaked in blood was it.

"If anybody ever once looks at me," she told Brick, "and still says you married me for my money, I'll tear him to shreds."

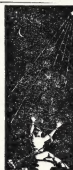
Brick laughed. He leaned from the saddle and kissed her.

White Feather saw this gesture and said: "Good."

THE END

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